



時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト：黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION：KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

リリアと  
レイズ  
V

私の王子様へ上

時雨沢恵一

KEICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト…黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

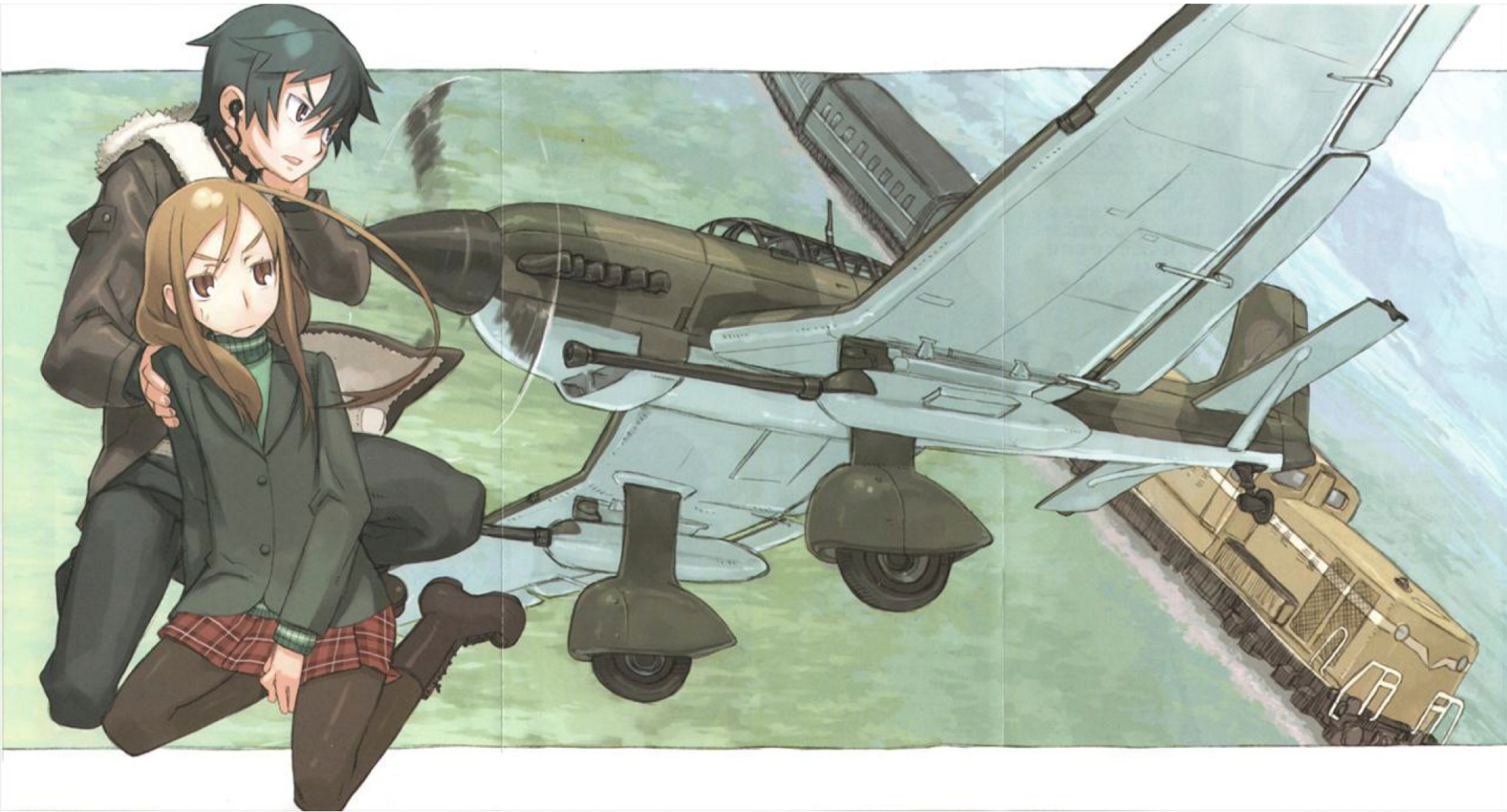
私の王子様〈下〉

# リリアと トレイズ

VI











### リリア・シュルツ

十六歳。  
ロクシアースク連邦(東側)首都に住む上級学校三年生。母はアリソン、父親は亡きヴィルヘルム・シュルツ。特技はベゼル語会話と飛行機の操縦。本名はとても長い。



### アリソン・シュルツ

三十五歳。  
ロクシェ空軍大尉。現在はテスト飛行士として活躍中。首都のアパートで娘リリアと二人暮らし。寝起きは相変わらずとても悪い。



### トラヴァス少佐

三十五歳。  
ベゼル・イルトア王国連合(西側)の軍人。大使館に勤める駐在武官で秘密情報部員。要するにスパイ。アリソンの現在の彼氏であり、正体は……。

### トレイズ

十七歳。  
フランチェスカ女王とベネディクトの息子。イクス王国の王子だが、諸事情により王子ではない。  
メリエル王女は双子で、どちらも年上かと係争中。正体を知らないリリアとは幼なじみ。



### マティルダ王女

二十歳。  
ベゼル王家の長女にして次期女王。公式訪問でロクシェを訪れるが……。



### フランチェスカ女王 (フィオナ) & ベネディクト

三十八歳と四十三歳。  
イクス王国の現女王と、“壁画発見の歴史的英雄”だったその夫。イクス王国にてのんびりと生活中。



**Lillia Schultz:** 16 years old. A fourth-year secondary school student who lives in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. Her mother is Allison, and her father is the late Wilhelm Schultz. Lillia's specialties are Bezelese and flying aeroplanes. Her full name is extremely long.

**Treize:** 17 years old. He is the son of Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict. Although Treize is a prince of Iks, certain circumstances prevent him from claiming royal status. He and his sister Meriel constantly argue about which one of them is the older twin. Treize and Lillia are childhood friends, but she does not know his true identity.

**Allison Schultz:** 35 years old. She is a captain in the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. Allison currently works as a test pilot, and lives with her daughter Lillia in an apartment in the Capital District. She is still a heavy sleeper.

**Major Travas:** 35 years old. He is part of the Royal Army of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. He is a military attaché who works in the embassy, and is part of the intelligence agency—in other words, he is a spy. Major Travas is currently Allison's boyfriend, but in reality—

**Queen Francesca (Fiona) & Benedict:** 38 and 42 years old, respectively. Francesca (Fiona) is the current Queen of Ikstova, and Benedict her husband is the Hero of the Mural. They are currently living a relaxed life in Iks.

**Princess Matilda:** 20 years old. She is the eldest daughter of the royal family of Bezel, and will one day become queen. She comes to Roxche on an official visit, but...

私の王子様へ下  
リリアと  
トレイズ  
VI

C O N T E N T S

- 9 第六章「我々は殺戮者ではない」  
69 第七章「犯人より愛をこめて」  
103 第八章「レイルトレイサー」  
135 第九章「私の王子様」  
179 第十章「リリアとトレイズ」  
201 「王子観察記」  
237 小生意気なガキ ～そして伝説へ～

<b>Chapter 6: We are Not Murderers</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 7: From the Culprit, With Love</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Chapter 8: Rail Tracer</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Chapter 9: My Prince</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Chapter 10: Lillia and Treize</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Chronicling the Prince</b>	<b>84</b>



## **Chapter 6: We are Not Murderers**

The sun had traveled more than halfway across the sky. Work on separating the cars continued.

The engineer and the driver separated the train at the coupling between the first class passenger car and the dining car. The two middle-aged railroad workers were oblivious to the earlier commotion because they had been busy running the train from the locomotive.

They exchanged shocked glances when they heard the news, but they followed Cohen's directions and got to work, confused.

First, they peeled off the connecting cover around the coupling and pulled back the footboard. Then they separated the electric cables and the pneumatic tubes. Finally, they unscrewed the connector and unhooked the ring.

In the meantime, Major Travas's team was standing warily on the tracks. The passengers, forbidden to leave the cars, remained inside.

Once the train was divided,

"Finished. Now we can continue."

"Excellent. Keep your radio turned on—we'll contact you if we need anything."

The engineer and the driver spoke with Cohen for a moment before returning to the locomotive.

Major Travas personally checked that the trains had been separated and turned to Cohen.

"I'd like for you to remain on the other train. Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Cohen. We'll contact you by radio."

Cohen made no attempt to hide his anger. "This is outrageous! I don't care who you are or what you're doing—this is unacceptable!"

Major Travas simply replied,

"We don't care."

In the second class passenger car, filled with partitioned seats.

"Hey, it looks like they're gone," the soldier, who had been leaning out the window, reported. The three-car train in his sights slowly departed.

Most of the train's passengers were gathered in this car.

Though they were not obligated to be there, the passengers seemed to be in silent agreement that they would stay away from the second class sleeper cars.

They had left their suitcases and trunks in the cabins, and were sitting in the uncomfortable seats. In a corner sat two waiters and a cook, all three of them with nothing to do.

Only the stern old man and his secretary remained stubbornly in their cabin, two cars ahead.

The bodies of the couple had been placed in the cabin where they had stayed.

"What is going on here?" the saleswoman groaned from near the middle of the car.

"What's going to happen to us now?" the suit-clad man wondered, as if to himself. The doctor—with his medical bag at his feet—replied.



“I suppose we’ll all be questioned by the police once we reach the next station...in any event, this really is a bother. When will we be free to go?”

“Argh... I have an important meeting in Lor tomorrow afternoon. I should have taken an aeroplane... What do I do...?” the suit-clad man agonized, holding his head in his hands.

No one answered. No one knew what to say.

“Right...it’s all right as long as we don’t have any more killers or suspicious suits in this train...count my blessings...” the man finally concluded, perhaps having given up.

Ten minutes passed with nothing being done.

The train shook. Some passengers flinched, but someone quickly explained that a locomotive had been connected to their train.

Soon, three men in Confederation Rail uniforms boarded the car.

One was Cohen the conductor. Of the others, one was young and the other was middle-aged.

Both the newcomers seemed confused by the unforeseen circumstances, but their expressions worsened when they saw the upset passengers.

“We’ve contacted the police at Azay Station. Ladies and gentlemen, please bear with us until we reach the station. We’ve also ordered the maintenance crew to search for the student and the baby. This train will soon be departing. We will arrive at Azay Station in less than three hours, before sunset,” said Cohen.

“Right...”

“I see.”

The passengers were unenthusiastic.

Several minutes after Cohen and the men left, the train began to move. With two corpses and many tired passengers onboard, the train missing two cars left the depot.

It twisted across several junctions before moving into the main line.

And it once more headed north.

\* \* \*

Inside the first train ahead, Major Travas’s team was holding a strategy meeting.

Everyone but Ann—who was in Hilda’s cabin—was in the first class sleeper car corridor and the adjoining cabins, which were now part of the last car of the train. They focused their sights outside, keeping a close eye on their surroundings.

All of them had assault rifles slung over their shoulders. In their suit pockets were spare magazines. They were ready for a shootout.

The conversation took place over radio, so Ann could also participate. And it all took place in Bezelese.

“We have a leak,” said Major Travas.

The four men in the corridor and the cabins nodded gravely.

“We did not inform Roxche about this train. Which unfortunately means the leak is from our side. I will suspend judgement for the time being,” Major Travas said, “but what we can be sure of now is that someone is attempting to harm the lady. And that this someone somehow knows about us.”

“Sounds serious,” said Uno.

“Seriously. It’s more than just the major’s head on the line here,” Yzma joked. No one laughed or got angry. And though Yzma had called him ‘major’ and not ‘leader’, no one scolded him.

<Seriously. It’s more than the major’s head on the line here.>

When Gratz Axentine heard Yzma’s joke, she silently looked outside. She saw nothing but a vast brown field, the monotony sometimes broken by clumps of trees.

“Now that we’re no longer incognito, there’s no advantage in working as a small team,” Ozette said from the hallway. Major Travas agreed.

“What about the fake couple? What’s your take on them, Major?” asked Yzma.

“They were throwaway pawns from the beginning. They likely had no idea about the lady.”

“Then is the mastermind really the one who poisoned them? Why would the couple even trust the mastermind and take those unknown drugs? They had no idea who they were working for.”

“The poison was in capsules. The mastermind probably told them that the capsules were antidotes to the poison, in case the couple accidentally had one of the poisoned lunches. He could tell them to take the capsules at a designated time,” Major Travas theorized without missing a beat.

“So...the other train breaking down, the angry passengers demanding to board this one, the death of the student, and the commotion in the dining car were all his doing?” said Yzma.

“If...” Uno began, unconsciously scratching his short-cropped hair, “If Ms. Schultz hadn’t stopped the man while he was panicking, the passengers would have turned against us the moment the couple died. Everyone who ate the lunches would have lost their minds. We would have been powerless to bring the situation under control.”

“So we’re dealing with a smart fellow here. He even expected us to hand out lunches,” said Ozette.

“He thinks like us,” Ed muttered. Major Travas agreed.

“This mastermind—or someone under his control—is among the passengers. And we have no way of knowing who he is until he makes a move. He’s surely prepared a plan B, C, or more, and depending on the way things go he will set the backups into motion.”

“In that case, everyone is looking pretty suspicious right about now,” said Yzma, “Oh. Except for the Schultz family, of course.”

“The trains have been separated, and we’re not likely to face any more obstacles. But don’t let your guard down. Azay Station is close to the Lutoni. There’s a highway across the river from there. We will procure a vehicle and cross via the bridge,” Major Travas explained their plan.

“Then it looks like Prince Treize won’t be joining us, being Roxchean. Too bad,” Uno noted.

“Yes. But...” Major Travas trailed off, after voicing his agreement.

“Is something bothering you, leader?” asked Ozette. Major Travas sounded uncharacteristically uncertain.

“Yes. Something’s been bugging me. Is this really the right course of action? I get the feeling that I’m overlooking something.”

“That’s not a good attitude for a leader to have,” Uno pointed out.

Major Travas apologized, then ordered,

“All right, men. Remain vigilant until we reach the next station. Destroy all obstacles with force.”

The train was headed for a certain junction.

The tracks leading north forked, branching off into a set of tracks heading northwest. The train moved at 80 kilometers an hour towards that point.

Naturally, the train passed the junction in the blink of an eye, continuing north.

The train headed into the horizon, shrank into a speck in the distance, and disappeared. At that moment—

“It’s gone!”

“Let’s get started.”

Two people appeared from next to the still-rumbling tracks.

They were wearing brown camouflage clothes with hoods over their heads, and cloth of a similar color wrapped around their faces. They were also covered in leaves. Because they had been lying on their stomachs in the grass until the train had passed, they were completely indistinguishable from the scenery. From their voices and builds they were clearly men.

The men climbed onto the gravel-covered rails and approached the junction. One of them swung an axe at the cable connected to the mechanism.

“Hah!”

He cut off the train’s means of communicating with the operations office. The other man pushed the massive junction lever.

Clunk. There was a loud metallic noise as the junction was switched, so the next train from the south would be railroaded towards the northwest.

“Perfect. Let’s go!”

“Right!”

The men then sprinted for the woods, about 150 meters away.

Hidden from sight behind the grove was a car.

It was a small four-wheel drive vehicle used both by civilians and the military. The canvas roof was open. The antenna was broken, secured to the frame of the windshield.

The men stepped inside. The one who got into the left-side seat—the driver’s seat—started the car.

The car drove onto a dirt road. The road ran parallel with the tracks for about 100 meters.

Just as the train had earlier, the car sped north

The man in the passenger seat spoke into the radio installed in the car.

<This is the junction team. Main crew, respond.>

<This is the main crew. ...Well?> a man replied. They were all speaking Roxchean.

The man in the passenger seat could scarcely hide his excitement.



<Success! The train's passed, just as scheduled! It's all moving along! We've switched the junction. Even if the operations office doesn't notice, the next train won't crash into this one.>

<Excellent. We will commence the operation. See you soon.>

The car sped up even more after the exchange. A bolt-action sniper rifle equipped with a scope, wrapped in a sleeping bag, shook in the trunk.

\* \* \*

Inside the train about 30 minutes behind the one carrying Major Travas.

The passengers sat languidly in the second class passenger car.

"We need to talk," Lillia said, gesturing to Treize.

She was standing in front of the door. Treize got up and followed her. They stepped out into the doorway together.

From her seat, Allison watched them leave. She yawned.

Making sure no one was around, Lillia pushed Treize.

"Whoa..."

He felt the door against his back.

"What's wrong?" Treize asked. Lillia was serious.

"Don't play dumb. I'm talking about the *date*."

"What?" Treize blurted, a hint of excitement in his voice.

"Mom and Major Travas's date."

"...Oh." Treize nodded, quickly brought back to reality. Lillia continued without a care for his disappointment.

"They were planning to go on a date in Lor after this job, weren't they? Mom never would have decided to come this far otherwise."

"I guess so. I don't know the details, but the major's escort mission is supposed to end once he sees off Hilda at Lor..."

"But that's not happening now, is it?!"

"Huh? Oh. Right. Since we'll have to spend the night at the next station." Treize nodded. Lillia glared.

"Can't you do something about this? I don't care if it's a day late. Mom and I are gonna be in Lor until the 29th."

"How am I supposed to help...?"

"You're the their guide, right? Don't you have their contact information? They're supposed to pay you, so you should know how to get in touch, right?"

Treize shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Even if I knew how to contact them, they're going to—"

They would get a car at the next station and immediately cross the Lutoni, Treize was about to say. But he stopped.

At that moment, the door opened and someone entered the doorway. Lillia turned cautiously.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to disturb you,” the man said reflexively in Bezelese. But he quickly realized his mistake and switched to Roxchean. “I will not bother.”

“It’s all right.” “Don’t worry about it,” Treize and Lillia replied in Bezelese. The man’s eyes turned to dinner plates.

“Well, who would’ve guessed? You two speak Bezelese!”

“It’s part of the job description.” “Yeah.”

Treize and Lillia replied.

“Marvelous! I’m a traveler; you have no idea how hard it was getting around Roxche, since no one speaks any Bezelese around here. Just wanted to know—what in the world is going on? First the train breaks down and we switch trains, and then these people die coughing up blood...is this common in Roxche?” the man asked, almost sounding enthusiastic.

Lillia glared. Treize replied, “Not at all. This whole situation is very complicated. I’m sure the police will explain everything later.”

“I see. ... You were with the other group, weren’t you? Is it all right for you to be here?”

“I was kicked out. I’m just a guide from Ikstova—I have nothing to do with their actual business.”

“I see. I’m sorry to hear that,” the man said, and moved away. “By the way, do you know where I could find the bathroom? Isn’t it supposed to be in the doorway?”

It was in the last car, Lillia told him.

“I see. Excuse me. I suppose I must’ve gotten my Roxchean mixed up.”

With that, the long-haired man winked and disappeared back into the car.

\* \* \*

The train carrying Major Travas was traveling parallel to a canal.

The canal was on the left side of the train—the western side—and was about 20 meters in width.

The tracks had been laid along the old canal. The only other thing of note was that the plains seemed to continue to the ends of the earth.

The area was once used for farming, but during the Great War half a century earlier, the locals were displaced and the fields became plains.

After the armistice, the area was declared a high-risk zone, occupied only by the military outposts dotting the region. Even now, when there was little chance of another war, the completely undeveloped lands remained unoccupied.

Inside the VIP cabin, Hilda was dozing off on the sofa. A gentle light shone from beyond the thin curtains, setting her golden hair aglow. Ann stood to the side of the room, keeping an eye on her.

Yzma was outside the cabin, guarding the corridor. Major Travas stood at the front end of the corridor.

Uno, Ozette, and Ed were keeping watch on the train's surroundings from the first class car. They all made sure to exchange regular transmissions.

The sun had fallen quite far, but there was still over an hour left until dusk. Sunlight glittered off the surface of the canal by the tracks.

<All clear here. Business as usual. Hope nothing else happens now. ...Actually, if this was a film, something would definitely happen right about now. End transmission.>

Yzma had just given a laid-back report.

<Th-this is the locomotive—>

The driver's frantic voice spoke from Major Travas's earpiece and the radios next to every team member.

<What's going on?> said Major Travas.

<A truck—there's a truck stopped on the tracks! I'm pulling the emergency brake!>

"Figures." Yzma cringed, regretting what he had just said.

Ann grimaced as she watched the sleeping Hilda.

<I'm afraid we can't stop,> Major Travas replied quickly, <Slow down the train slightly and continue onward. This train is more than strong enough enough to clear it from the tracks.>

<Right, sir,> the driver replied.

<Right, sir,> the driver in the locomotive replied quickly, before exchanging glances with the engineer.

They were both smiling.

"Heh."

"Ha ha ha."

Outside the windshield, about 500 meters ahead on the tracks, was a mid-sized truck with a canvassed bed.

"We're gonna be rich. We'll be filthy, stinkin' rich!"

The driver howled with bloodshot eyes as he reached for the brake handle. And he pulled it without a second thought.

Major Travas felt the emergency brake kick in and contacted the locomotive again.

<Do not stop the train.>

The driver replied in a mocking voice, <Too bad, sucker! We don't take orders from you now!>

"So they were in on this... I should've known," Major Travas hissed, realizing his position.

The wheels screeched as the train slowed down.

Hilda opened her eyes. Ann caught her before she could fall forward.

<Looks like they pulled one over on us,> Yzma snickered.

<Hm. Looks like we'll be getting quite a bit of mileage from our training. Ed, do you see anything on the canal side?> said Ozette.

<No,> Ed replied.

The train slowed more and more. And it finally came to a stop with a loud thunk.



There were about 50 meters to the truck.

<Ann, protect the lady. Yzma, remain in the cabin and check the canal. Everyone else, keep your eyes on the right side of the train,> Major Travas ordered, and entered the VIP room beside him—the one Treize had used.

<Multiple persons sighted on the right. Vehicles, too,> Uno reported.

“I knew it.”

Major Travas peered out between the curtains.

On the plains—dotted with snow and still without a spot of green—stood human figures.

People were scattered on the ground about 7 or 8 kilometers from the tracks. There were about 20 of them.

About 100 meters behind the men were the two small four-wheel-drive cars they had come by. One of them was occupied by two people.

It was all was clearly visible under the sunlight.

<Confirmed,> Major Travas said. The next report came in.

<Two men running from the locomotive. They are running towards the group.>

Major Travas glanced to his left.

Just as Ed explained, the engineer and the driver had abandoned the train and their careers and were splashing across the muddy ground.

Major Travas picked up the assault rifle he had left in the cabin. He loaded the magazine and loaded the first round.

<Do not open fire.>

The unfolded rifle was in his right hand. With his left he pressed the talk button for his microphone. <If they approach us, you may fire at will. But that doesn't seem too likely.>

Once the escaped engineer and the driver had joined the men on the field, the right side of the train was completely still. The people lying on their stomachs on the ground remained where they were, showing no sign of movement.

“Good for us, then.”

Inside a first class cabin, Uno had moved the sofa from beside the window. He pushed his suitcase against the window frame.

Then he opened the suitcase. He propped up the lid with a pair of metal pipes.

The suitcase was large and looked no different from ordinary models. But inside were not changes of clothes or souvenirs.

Fastened to the inside of the lid with a leather band was a folded assault rifle. It was a backup in case something happened to the first.

Organized neatly inside the suitcase were over 30 magazines. Ammunition glinted at the ends.

Next to the magazines was a wooden box containing a dozen grenades—pins secured with tape—arranged delicately like a box of eggs.

Finally, there was a Sou Be-II military-issue helmet, complete with ear flaps.

“‘Be ready for anything’. It was worth dragging this thing around.”

Uno pulled the helmet over his head and quickly but gingerly began to peel the tapes off the grenades.

Inside the VIP cabin, Axe opened up the two suitcases she had dragged over from the corner. She propped up the lids just as Uno had in the other cabin.

Inside the suitcases were small helmets and several military-issue bulletproof vests. It was a chilling sight.

"Excuse me, Your Highness," Ann said, quickly putting a vest and a helmet on Hilda. "We're terribly sorry. Please remain still."

"I see something unfortunate must be happening," Hilda said calmly, ducking as Ann instructed. Ann responded as calmly as she could, though she could not completely hide the shaking of her voice.

"Yes, ma'am."

She then used the spare vests to cover Hilda's legs.

<You, the group on the train. We want to talk to your leader. I repeat. We want to talk to your leader. Do you hear me? Respond immediately,> an unfamiliar voice said through the earpieces.

"Hm? Aha. Nice of 'em to go to the trouble of contacting us," Yzma muttered, scanning the canal side of the train with his assault rifle at the ready.

Major Travas replied to the message through the same channel that they had earlier used with the locomotive.

<I'm the leader. I will listen to what you have to say. Who are you?>

<Heh. Let's just say I'm the representative of the team that's surrounding you,> the man replied condescendingly. His voice did not sound very old. He was probably not yet middle-aged. <We have your train surrounded.>

Yzma burst out laughing. "Whoa! Which third-rate play did he get that line from?"

Amidst his own laughter, however, Yzma made sure that no one was on the canal side—that the surface of the water remained entirely undisturbed.

<We will give you a chance to surrender. Drop your weapons and step out of the train, and we will spare your lives.>

<What is your purpose? Why did you target us?> asked Major Travas.

<We want the load of gold ingots you're transporting,> the man demanded. Major Travas sighed, exasperated.

<First it's jewels, and now it's gold ingots. We're dealing with a bunch of idiots here,> Yzma commented. Uno followed up.

<But they're surprisingly well-prepared. The mastermind got them hook, line, and sinker, just like the couple earlier.>

<Imbeciles. They probably think they'll get rich if they pull this off,> Ozette added.

Ten seconds later, Major Travas pressed the talk button. <H-how did you know? Who are you?> he said, making a point of sounding shocked.

<I see no point in answering that question. We're simply patriots of Lor,> the man replied, letting the answer slip. The surprise in Travas's tone had led him to drop his guard.

“Correction. We’re dealing with a bunch of *first-class* idiots,” Yzma said snidely.

<You have 10 minutes. We will spare you if you all come out of the train with your hands in the air.>

With that, the man ended the transmission.

But he quickly connected back and added, <Don’t worry. We are not murderers.>

Once the men outside had stopped, Major Travas and his team resumed communication.

<Reporting in. Twenty-three hostiles on standby about 7 kilometers on the right side of the train. No camouflage, no face coverings. Mostly armed with handguns and submachine guns. Fewer than five rifles between them. No individual radios. No one in the vicinity of the truck on the tracks.>

Yzma followed. <Reporting in. No sign of an ambush on the canal side. It’s all clear. Probably to make sure they don’t shoot one another in the crossfire. Or maybe it’s just to corner us.>

Finally, Ed, in the doorway of the last car. <No hostiles behind the train.>

Ozette said that he had nothing to add. Ann reported that Hilda was calm and following instructions.

Major Travas glanced at his wristwatch. It had been one minute since the ultimatum.

<The Lor Patriots’ Front. A group of outlaws who engage in kidnappings, bombings, and terrorism for the alleged purpose of narrowing the gap between rich and poor. And they seem to seriously believe we’re carrying a load of gold ingots on this train,> Uno said. Yzma chimed in.

<It’s almost baffling how stupid these people are. Looks like our mastermind has a knack for manipulating imbeciles into doing his bidding.>

Major Travas finally spoke, stating a horrifying fact.

<From their lack of face coverings, I suppose they have no intention of letting us live.>

Uno agreed, <Yes. They’re likely planning to load the ‘gold ingots’ onto a truck. After that, they’ll probably have the engineer derail the train into the canal. Or burn the train with the bodies. They offered us a chance to surrender because they’d rather not risk a shootout or because they’re waiting for reinforcements.>

Major Travas agreed. Then, <We’ll send a response five minutes before the deadline. Prepare for battle.>

With that, he ended the transmission. He didn’t have to say what he planned to tell the Lor Patriots’ Front.

“No word from the driver. What should I do?”

“Keep trying. But don’t stop the next train until it starts getting dangerous.”

One of the employees at the operations office in Raputoa was beginning to panic. The supervisor responded with an annoyed look.

And,

“If you’ll excuse me, I have a stomachache.”

The supervisor left as the other employees watched, confused. He quickly walked down the hall and entered a deserted bathroom.

“Heh heh heh...”

The moment he locked the door, he began to chuckle.



He slammed the flush handle ecstatically.

"Now he'll keep his promise and erase my wife! I can finally start over!" he whispered to himself.

When Major Travas reached the door to Hilda's room, he armed the safety on his assault rifle and laid it on the floor. Then he knocked and stepped inside.

There was Hilda, sitting on the carpet in her bulletproof vest and helmet. She no longer had to lie against the floor.

Major Travas sat on bended knee and bowed his head.

"Your Highness. We will now proceed to forcibly eliminate these threats. There will be a commotion outside."

Hilda fixed her tilted helmet and looked him in the eye. "You're going to kill the people out there to protect me?"

"Yes," Major Travas said without a moment's hesitation, his head still bowed.

"And will that also be an act of protecting yourself and your subordinates?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"In that case...you have my blessings," Hilda said firmly, and ordered Major Travas to raise his head. He did.

Hilda looked him straight in the eye. "After all, I would like to meet Lillianne again someday."

They had about five minutes left.

<Let's get started,> Major Travas said from the VIP cabin, as casual as if he were having a barbecue with his friends.

Ann protected Hilda in the VIP cabin with a handgun.

Ozette and Uno lay on their stomachs behind their suitcases in the first class cabins, with assault rifles at the ready.

Ed was in the doorway of the last car with a suitcase, two rifles, and a sniper rifle.

Finally, Yzma was in the VIP car doorway, keeping an eye on both sides of the train.

Each subordinate casually declared their readiness.

<You may begin,> Major Travas said, ending the transmission.

But he quickly added one more point.

<Show them that we *are* murderers.>

<This is the train. Can you hear me?>

<Yes. You've still got five minutes, but I'm willing to listen if you have your answer.>

<Of course. We've made our decision.>

In the doorway of the VIP car, Yzma disarmed the safety on his assault rifle. He moved the selector that doubled as the safety lever to the semi-automatic function at the very bottom.

"Give 'em a good one, Major."

Major Travas did.

<We don't have an ounce of gold to hand over to fools like you. Move the truck out of our way in the next five seconds. Can you hear me? If you do not move the truck, we will kill you all. Prepare yourselves.>

"Whoo!" Yzma cheered, checking that his gun was loaded.

The line was silent for about 20 seconds following Major Travas's ultimatum.

Then came a scathing response.

<You all die here.>

"They have refused our terms! Kill them all! But don't burn the train unless you want all the gold to melt!" the man cried from beside the car.

He was the one who had earlier communicated through the radio with the junction crew. He had a slender frame and a scholarly bearing. The man was wearing green combat gear and had a holster at his side. Fittingly for a leader, there was a pair of binoculars around his neck.

Sitting in the driver's seat was a man of a similar age and build.

Twenty-three sets of ears heard the command.

"Let's get 'em! Take no prisoners—show them what we can do, for the glory of Lor!" Someone declared.

"YEAH!"

The men ducked close to the ground as they moved forward.

They ranged in age from their twenties to their fifties, and were not in any sort of uniform. Some wore combat gear, while others were in simple work wear.

They were armed mostly with several varieties of handguns and submachine guns with magazines jutting out the left side and pipes around the barrel. The men also had four or so powerful bolt-action rifles between them.

"Er...what about us?" asked the train driver and the engineer from behind the car. The leader replied without looking back.

"There's nothing for you to do right now. Step back about 10 meters until this is over. Keep your head down so you don't get hit by stray bullets."

The driver and the engineer nodded and stepped away. They hid themselves behind the cars so they were not visible from the train. Then they both sat down on the moist ground.

"Hey," the leader called to the man in the driver's seat, and gestured briefly.

The man in the driver's seat said nothing as he drew a suppressed submachine gun from the back seat. He loaded it and disarmed the safety.

"Hm?"

By the time one of the men on the ground realized what was happening, it was too late.

*Psh. Psh. Psh. Psh.*

There was a series of quiet gunshots. Shell casings leapt into the air and fell to the ground. The two train employees died bleeding everywhere.

"We've got nothing for you pieces of trash. The gold exists solely for our noble purposes," the leader said.

At that moment, he spotted a car driving up to them from the left.

The car grew bigger and bigger in his sights—it was the one carrying the junction crew. When the leader looked ahead again, he saw his men about 5 meters from the train. There was no sign of a counterattack.

“Excellent.” The leader smiled.

<Begin.>

That was all Major Travas said.

“Excellent.” The leader smiled.

His head broke.

The 7.62 caliber round pierced his skin and drove itself into his left temple, its momentum instantly expanding.

The man’s skull collapsed under the pressure and was shattered. The force of the impact escaped out the other side of his head, scattering blood and brains everywhere.

“Huh?”

The man in the driver’s seat, covered in blood and brains at the moment of the gunshot, also collapsed in the same way.

<‘Beheading’ complete,> Ed reported, holding a sniper rifle. He was lying in the doorway and opening fire through the gap in the door. Two shell casings had fallen next to him.

<Good. Open fire,> Major Travas ordered.

“Finally,” Yzma said, taking aim at a man approaching the train.

“Shit! They’ve started!”

The man in camouflage gear who had switched the junction swore, watching the team slowly approach the train.

He ordered the driver to bring their car up next to the leader’s—

“Huh?”

—And saw the leader fall. A second later, a splash of red filled the driver’s seat of the leader’s car. That was followed by two gunshots.

“No...”

And he saw flashes of light from the train.

Gunfire began drumming on the once-quiet plains. The men approaching the train fell with almost laughable ease.

“Stop! Stop the car!” the man cried.

The driver hit the brakes. The car skidded to a halt about 200 meters before reaching its destination. The man quickly leapt out the right side of the car. A second later, a storm of bullets ravaged it.

Metal punctured metal, ringing like a set of bells.

“Urgh!” the driver gasped, dying with blood spewing from his face and chest.

Before the man who had leapt out of the car could hit the ground, a bullet pierced his left arm. He slipped on impact, collapsing on the ground.

“Damn it...” he muttered, covered in mud. Tracer shots flew over his head like arcs of light.

Inside the first class cabin.

Ozette finished firing on the approaching car and looked ahead again, changing magazines. The last three rounds in the magazine were tracer shots that signaled the magazine was running out.

The cabin window was already wide open. Ozette peered out from behind the suitcase and took aim at a figure 40 meters ahead. The figure was desperately trying to flee.

Ozette pulled the trigger.

A shell casing leapt into the air before hitting the wall and falling.

The fleeing man was hit. His heart stopped instantly. He fell forward and never moved again.

The gun was turned on its next prey.

One by one, the men on the muddy plain fell to bullets from the train before them.

The leaders were already dead. Without anyone to issue clear commands, the men were slaughtered without even a chance to take shelter.

“Return fire! The lights! Look for flashes of light when they fire and shoot back!” one lucky middle-aged man said to a man next to him, who was holding a submachine gun. Both men were practically clinging to the earth.

“Shit!”

The man with the submachine gun raised his gun with his stomach still flat against the dirt. The frame of the first class cabin window was visible in the backlight of the flashes. He took aim.

And he opened fire.

The 9mm handgun rounds flew directly at the window.

“Yeah. That should do it.” He grinned.

The last thing he saw was the light from a single shot returning from the window he had shot.

He died bleeding on his submachine gun.

“That was close,” Uno said, quickly switching out magazines with his stomach flat on the floor. Though he still had five rounds still left, he exchanged it for one loaded with 30.

There were holes in the leather cover of the suitcase he was using as a shield. But none of the bullets had made it past the lid.

“‘Be ready for anything’...”

With his left hand, Uno tapped the suitcase lid.

The metal plate on the inside of the lid clattered.

“This is just like practice...”

Yzma seemed bored. He fired off two more shots from the doorway. They took the lives of two men.

Then, Yzma stepped back and checked the canal side of the train. There was no one there.  
“I’m almost disappointed.”

He ducked back into the doorway and lay on his stomach behind his suitcase. A second later, the suitcase shook.

“Whoa!”

The suitcase sacrificed itself to a rifle shot, protecting Yzma. But the edge of the lid hit Yzma square on the forehead, leaving what would end up being a very long-lasting bruise.

“Ow... Okay, focus.”

With a renewed sense of professionalism, Yzma got down and took aim at the man who had just fired at him, who was operating the bolt on his rifle.

But before Yzma could even pull the trigger, Major Travas’s barrage shattered the rifle and turned the man into a corpse.

In Treize’s VIP cabin at the very front of the train, Major Travas was half-leaning against a suitcase by the left side of the window.

<Continue fire,> he ordered over the radio as he assessed the situation through the open window. Then he let go of the talk button and switched his assault rifle magazine with his left hand. The old magazine was empty. Once he had locked in the new one, he covered the top and right side of the rifle and pulled the lever.

He listened to the dull sound of metal on metal.

*“I solemnly swear to use guns responsibly—”*

He whispered under his breath,

“I solemnly swear to use guns responsibly. I swear to use guns only to kill our enemies, save our countrymen, and protect our homeland.”

Nineteen years ago, Wilhelm Schultz had held up his right hand before his classmates and friends as he made a vow.

It was at the Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School in the Neit region of the Republic of Raputoa. Snow was scattered on the grounds. Roofed walkways connected the school buildings.

Before the row of secondary school students were desks. On each desk was a military-issue bolt-action rifle. Fixed to the cartridge chamber was a mechanism for changing the caliber. On the sight was a mirror by which the instructor could check the student’s aim. And printed on the stock in large font were the words ‘FOR RECRUIT TRAINING’.

Beyond the desks stood a sergeant in his fifties wearing a Confederation Army uniform. His right leg was a stick-shaped prosthetic from the knee down. Though there was a stern look on his face, the staff sergeant bellowed with a strangely warm smile.

“Good! I have heard your vows. Now I will instruct you to properly use a gun. Though this is a credit course, marksmanship is also a technique necessary to protect your homeland! Take your vows to heart! I am here to raise protectors of the weak, champions of good! I am not here to raise murderers!”

“I solemnly swear...”

Reciting his vows under his breath, Major Travas raised his assault rifle to shoulder-level and saw a man about 20 meters away, pulling out a petrol bomb from his bag and lighting it.

The moment the man stood upright to throw, Major Travas opened fire on automatic. The bullets hit the man's arm. The bottle shattered and his body was engulfed in flames.

As the man screamed, Major Travas fired one shot into the man's head. He died instantly. The corpse quietly burned.

<Shoot the cars.>

When Ed—still in the doorway of the last car—heard Major Travas's order, he turned his gaze to the distance.

There was the four-wheel-drive vehicle where the leader and the driver had been before they were shot. One man had managed to avoid the gunfire to return to the cars. He climbed into the remaining car and started it.

<I'll get it,> Ed replied, putting down his steaming assault rifle and grabbing a backup.

He removed the curved magazine, which held 30 rounds, and pulled out a drum-shaped magazine containing 75 rounds from the suitcase. He attached it to the assault rifle.

“Shit! He said they'd only have handguns! He said this would be a piece of cake! Damn it! They're practically an army!”

The man swore as he quickly started the car. He turned and began heading south without sparing a thought for his comrades. He did not even blink as he ran over the bodies of the two railroad employees.

When Ed saw the car turn, he stopped firing. He turned to his right and leapt from the coupling and onto the tracks. He quickly went behind the train to avoid being targeted and took aim with his assault rifle, using the train itself as a shield.

He took a deep breath.

Ed took aim at the car as it fled south and opened fire on automatic.

Suppressing the powerful recoil with raw strength and adjusting his aim with the tracer shots that fired every four rounds, Ed showered the car with nearly 50 bullets. Shell casings flew into the air and scattered around him.

The car continued, sparks flying as the bullets hit. And out of nowhere, it was engulfed in flames.

The fuel tank at the back of the car had exploded. The car spun. The man in the driver's seat flew into the air, covered in flames.

<Done,> Ed reported.

<Excellent. Not many left now. Focus on eliminating the rest,> Major Travas ordered.

Ed carefully peered out from behind the train as he scanned the area for enemies.

About 50 meters ahead he spotted a young man about 20 years of age, frozen in terror. He was sitting on the ground with his head in his hands, crying.

Ed opened fire on automatic. Using the recoil, he swept the target from left to right.

Countless bullets pierced the young man. He no longer had to tremble in fear.



Gunfire punctuated the air.

Sometimes, one at a time. Sometimes rhythmically like the sound of drumming.

Inside the VIP cabin, Hilda was lying on her stomach on the floor. Ann stuck by the suitcase and peered outside through the gap in the curtains. Though it was not a very long time, it seemed for all the world like an eternity.

Each time there was a gunshot, and each time a bullet hit the train—

“Ah!”

—Hilda would flinch.

Ann turned.

“It’s going to be fine, Your Highness. No one’s gotten near the train. We won’t let them.”

“I’m all right,” Hilda replied resolutely, “I’m not going to die like this. Nor will you and the team, or Major Travas.”

“Of course,” Ann said. But what Hilda said next shook her to the core.

“Major Travas chose to protect me over his own daughter. So neither of us can die here,” she said with a smile.

“His—daughter...? Wh-what do you mean, Your Highness?” Ann repeated. Hilda struggled to look up under the weight of her helmet. She seemed to be surprised by Ann’s shock.

“His daughter. Lillianne. Lillia’s mother is the major’s wife.”

“...Your Highness...what do you mean by that?”

“Didn’t you know? I could tell the moment I saw Lillia’s eyes. She’s Major Travas’s daughter.”

“That’s...not possible. ...The major should have been in Sfrestus...”

“I don’t know all the details, but—”

At that moment, the gunfire ended. Ann heard Major Travas’s voice through her earpiece.

<Hold fire. Report all injuries,> said Major Travas. No one said a thing for three seconds.

<Good. Ed, Ozette, come with me. We’ll be checking the bodies. Yzma, take over Ann’s post. Uno, Ann, to the roof with the sniper rifle. You’ll be covering us.>

Everyone responded in acknowledgement.

<Yes, sir. I’ll head to the roof,> Ann replied into the radio. Then she turned. “Please stay where you are, Your Highness, and don’t take off the vests or the helmet. And please pretend I haven’t heard what you just told me. Please.”

Hilda nodded silently.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! I’ll take over now,” Yzma said brightly, entering the cabin.

The muddy fields were covered in blood.

Some were missing half their heads. Some had gaping holes in their chests. Some lay on the ground with their arms blown off. Most of the men who had tried to approach the train were corpses.

Ed, Ozette, and Major Travas examined the fallen men, one after another.

Ozette approached the bodies first with a handgun at the ready, and Ed covered him with an assault rifle. Major Travas followed, also holding a rifle and keeping a close eye on their surroundings.

When they encountered a body lying face-down, Ozette slowly flipped it over. Once he was sure the corpse was a corpse, he would place the corpse's hands over its eyes.

When they discovered someone playing dead, moaning, or with limbs still twitching, Ed immediately opened fire.

Ann and Uno were on the roof of the first class sleeper car.

Down the center of the car was a meter-wide walkway strip used for maintenance. Ann sat in that walkway with her legs forward. Her elbows were on her knees, and she was aiming a very long sniper rifle.

A soft but chilly northerly wind shook her black hair.

With her right eye on the scope, Ann looked to see if anyone was still moving. Major Travas bobbed in and out of her sight.

Uno stood at her left with an assault rifle, keeping an eye on the area.

The canal was as calm as it could be. The surface of the water was still. Black smoke wafted from the car that had exploded in the distance. No one but their team moved.

Several bursts of gunfire later.

<Extermination complete. You may relax.>

Ann breathed a sigh of relief. She took her eye off the scope and stretched out her legs before bending them again.

Major Travas was on the plain, checking corpses for potential evidence.

"Could I ask you something, sir? Something's been bothering me," Ann said, still holding the sniper rifle.

"What is it?" Uno replied. He was unconsciously fiddling with his cropped hair.

"It's about Major Travas. I was told that he and Ms. Schultz, the Roxchean pilot—"

"—Are dating? I thought that was obvious," Uno said nonchalantly. Ann corrected him.

"No, sir. I was told that Lillianne Schultz was their daughter. Is this true?" she asked with a glint in her eye.

"Hm. Can't say I know for certain," Uno replied, again as nonchalant as ever. Ann was nearly convinced by his attitude.

"So it's not complete nonsense, then. ...But I don't understand. The major should have been attending the Royal Officer Academy. All students are mandated to live in the dorms. It's impossible... Isn't it?"

"Who knows? It's not that important, anyway," Uno replied. Ann was not satisfied with the answer.

"But sir, it *is* important. How could we trust a commanding officer with a dubious past \_\_\_"

"Why are you so curious?" Uno said, cutting her off.

Both Uno and Ann were looking at the plain. Major Travas and the others were still examining the corpses.

"A-as I said, if we want to carry out important missions, our commanding officer—"

"It's cause he killed your father, right?"

The sniper rifle in Ann's grip trembled.

"How...did you...?"

Slowly, she turned.

Uno was still looking over the plains, as calm as he could be.

“Heh. Your first day on the team, you were practically radiating bloodlust. So I decided to air out the place and ask the major. And he told me straight out. Didn’t try to hide a thing.”

“Wh-what did he say?”

“That he killed Captain Gratz when he was young. Your father passed away the year the mural was found, so it’s hard to see the major having killed someone when he was still a kid... Well, I don’t know all the details, either.”

“Did the major really say so himself?”

“Yep. Headmaster Aikashia said something similar later. And this is what the major told me: ‘Gratz Axentine has every reason to avenge her father. If it seems to you that she will take action—’”

“‘Stop her’?”

“‘*Don’t* try to stop her’. He said it would be meaningful in its own way if he were to be your first kill. He also said, ‘and so, the cycle of revenge will end’.”

Ann was silent.

“Well, we all have our own lives to live. No one can make your decisions for you. And you take responsibility for the consequences of your decisions.”

“...Captain Berkins.”

“Hm?”

Ann continued, almost jokingly, “You know a great deal, don’t you?”

The man called Captain Berkins—Uno—grinned. “This might be my only chance, so I’m going to tell you now.”

“Your *only* chance?”

“I’m not going to repeat myself, so listen well, Gratz Axentine. ...My original mission was to keep an eye on the major. A spy for a spy, you could say. I was ordered to give detailed reports to the military on the major’s actions. To contact the military immediately if he showed any sign of treachery, and to kill him if necessary. But as you can see, the major is a true patriot. He loves our homeland and he loves Roxche—he loves the world.”

Ann could not say a word.

“Call me a coward, but I don’t think the major would have killed Captain Gratz without a reason.”

Ann said nothing. Uno continued.

“On that note, the major is planning on going on a long vacation after this mission. He’s already received permission. Seems to me like he’s going to have a chat with Ms. Schultz about their future.”

“You mean...he’s going to retire?”

“Who knows? Let’s just say it’s possible. And if he retires, I’m done too.”

Ann was silent.

“You might not see him for a while. So make sure you don’t have any regrets,” Uno said, and quickly added one more comment. “Also, pretend you didn’t hear any of this.”

Ann, staring into the scope, looked up at Uno with a smile.

“Hear what?”

“Excellent.”

Immediately afterwards,

<Come on down, Uno. Ann, remain at your post,> Major Travas said through the radio, almost as if he had been waiting for the conversation to end.

After responding, Uno stepped down using the railings on the side of the coupling.

Alone on the roof, Ann absently cast a southward glance.

The long, straight tracks they had traveled along continued all the way to the horizon.

Uno crossed the bloodstained plains and joined the others.

Major Travas, Ed, and Ozette were searching the car that the leader had been in, which was now occupied by a corpse with half a head.

On the hood of the car were documents they had found in a bag soaked with blood and brains, weighed down under a handgun and a magazine.

“Strange. What a conundrum,” Major Travas said.

“Yeah. From the informant’s documents here, this group was also played by the mastermind. But—”

“But they were too poorly equipped. They didn’t get any clear information.”

Ozette and Ed commented. Uno nodded.

“If the mastermind’s goal was to eliminate the lady, and he knew about us, he obviously would have known about our gear. He would have known that we had enough equipment to practically wage a war. Then why didn’t he tell these people about our security when he told them about the gold?” Major Travas wondered.

Ozette commented, “They would have prepared a lot more sniper rifles. They could have easily bought models smuggled out of the military. And the way these people attacked bothers me, too. Crawling in slowly in an open area like this is practically suicide. The mastermind could have instructed them better.”

“If I were the mastermind, I would have set up bombs on the tracks. Then I could derail the train and take the gold. That way the passengers wouldn’t leave unscathed, either,” Ed noted.

“Hm. That would have been an option as well. They could have torched the train along with the passengers afterwards. But the mastermind neglected to use even such a simple plan. Why is that?” Major Travas asked himself, “Why? Why did someone so clever let these people launch what amounted to an ineffective suicide attack?”

Narrowing his eyes, Major Travas looked down and stared into the distance. No one spoke.

Five seconds later.

“I see... He didn’t *let* them launch such a foolish attack...”

Major Travas raised his head.

“I’ve got it! I understand what he’s after now.”

All eyes were on Major Travas.

Including one unknown set of eyes.

“Shit...”

It was the man in camouflaged clothes, who had switched the tracks at the junction. After being shot in the arm, he had curled up in the mud and grass. A bandage was wrapped tightly around his upper arm to stop his bleeding.

He had been listening to the painful deaths of his dying friends, clenching his teeth.

The moment he thought to catch a ride on an approaching car, the car exploded. The friend who was thrown into the air screamed as he writhed in pain before finally dying.

As he listened to the gunshots from the murderers who took care to shoot those still left alive, he had slowly reached into the trunk and grabbed a sniper rifle.

He pulled out the rifle and placed the stock on his bloody left arm. He operated the bolt with his right hand. Although his enemies couldn't possibly hear from that distance, he still took care to be as silent as possible.

Once he had loaded the rifle, he slowly crept forward—fighting the burning agony—and lay on his stomach beside the car.

About 200 meters away was a car of the same model. The murderers were standing there. At the center of the group was a man wearing glasses.

The man on the ground concluded that the bespectacled one must be the leader.

“Damn you...I'll get you if it's the last thing I do...”

The crosshairs in his scope aligned with the man's glasses. He looked into his eyes.

The murderer looked up and said something. Naturally, the man could not hear him.

“Yes...those will be...your last words.”

A bloodied finger touched the trigger.

The sniper smiled, slowly pulling the trigger.

All that practice had paid off. The rifle did not budge at the moment of fire.

The bullet flew faster—and more accurately—than the speed of sound and blew off half the man's head.

A shell casing leapt into the air, glinting in the sunlight as it fell onto the tracks.

Having committed her first murder, Gratz Axentine slowly reached for her own neck.

<I've taken care of the sniper aiming for the major. Extermination complete.>

The man whose last words were 'last words' was the last of his group to die.

\* \* \*

<Excellent work, First Lieutenant Gratz. ...And thank you.>

At that moment, inside a train traveling dozens of kilometers away—

“Hm.”

A man glanced at his wristwatch.

“Have they exterminated them by now?” wondered the man once called ‘Prisoner 42’.

## **Chapter 7: From the Culprit, With Love**

<Attention, team,> Major Travas said through the radio, <I've reasoned out the mastermind's true intentions.>

Major Travas was standing next to the cars, facing the train Hilda was on. Uno was wiping the blood off the seats and the steering wheel.

Their sniper was still on guard, keeping an eye on the area from the roof of the train.

Ed and Ozette were heading to the tracks to get the truck out of the way.

<The mastermind's target is not the lady. He is after Prince Treize. I repeat. His target has been Prince Treize from the very beginning. Every obstacle he set for us has been easy to overcome. It was all designed that way. The mastermind was plotting to send us ahead to separate us from Prince Treize.>

All ears were on the radio.

Yzma, who was in the VIP cabin, blurted without thinking—

“Aha! So he was after *him*!”

Hilda had taken off her helmet and bulletproof vests and was fixing her hair, when she heard Yzma's exclamation.

Her emerald-green eyes narrowed and she glared at Yzma more intensely than ever before. But he did not notice.

<The mastermind is from Sou Be-Il. And he remains respectful to the royal family. He planned for the lady to be unharmed. But the mastermind is adamant that Roxchean blood does not enter Sfrestus.>

<Makes sense. So what now, Major?> asked Yzma. Through the window he could see two people returning to the train by car.

<We abandon the train. We'll switch to the truck and the car. We head to the town of Azay to report to the authorities before we cross the Lutoni as planned.>

<I see. So we can leave the rest to Roxche's poliiiiiii— Ack! Ow! Whoa! Wait! Please! Stop! No!>

Yzma's screams filled the radio, then cut off. The reason soon became clear.

<Major Travas, can you hear me? Do you hear my voice?>

Hilda's voice came over the radio.

Major Travas ordered Uno to stop the car. He replied over the radio as he walked the 10 or so meters left to the train, <Yes, I hear you loud and clear. What is it?>

Hilda's reply was immediate.

<I'm not the target, am I? It's Treize.>

Ed and Ozette were searching the truck for traps or explosives. That was when they heard Hilda's voice.

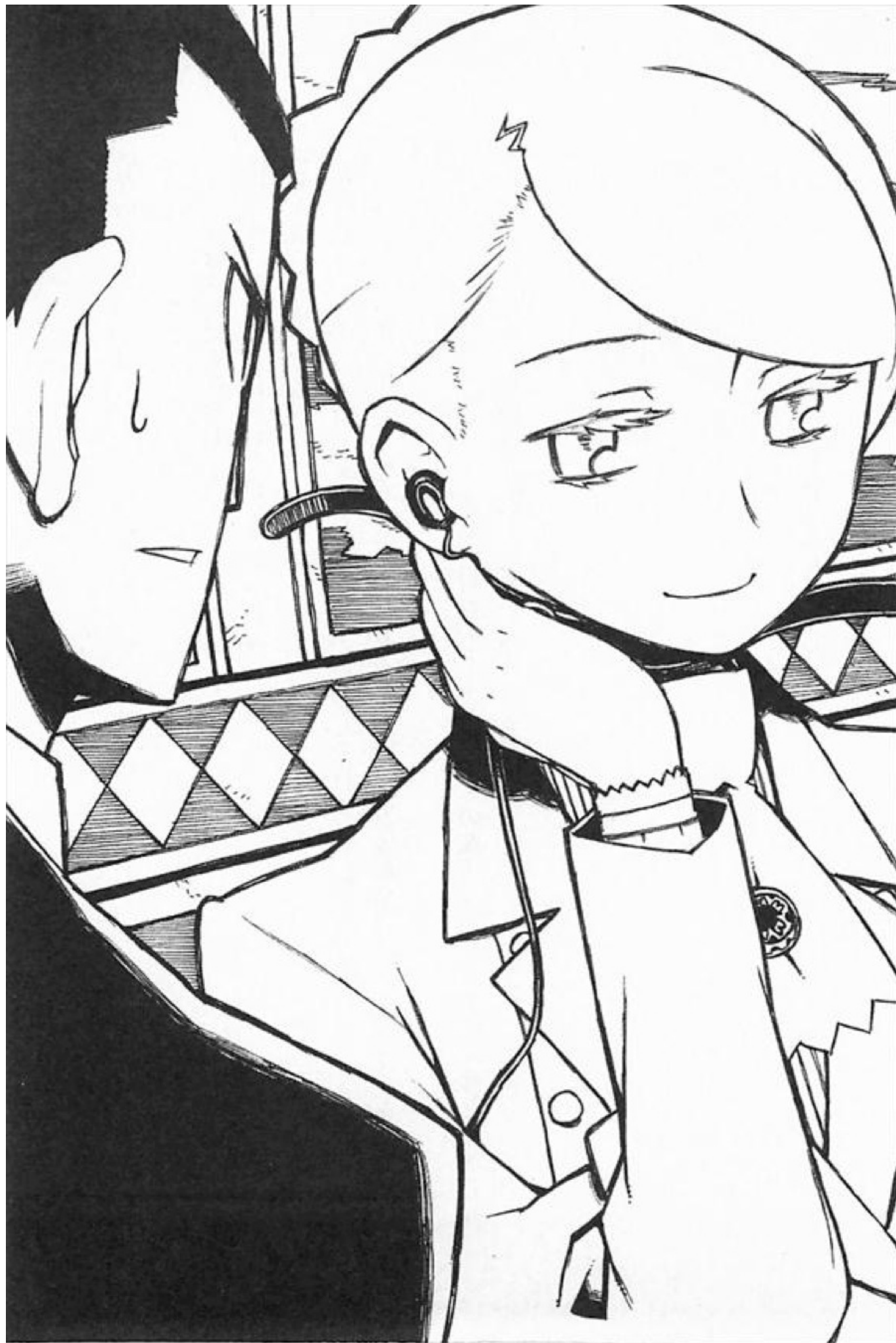
“Yzma, that imbecile...”

“Figures.”

“That's an aristocrat for you. Full of openings.”

“You said it.”





Yzma, meanwhile, was standing awkwardly beside Hilda.

His earpiece and the microphone he had strapped to his neck were now in Hilda's possession. Major Travas's voice escaped the radio strapped to his waist.

<That's correct, Miss.> Travas paused. <Yes. The mastermind's target is Prince Treize. The threats against you were all a ploy to distract us and separate us from him. We are no longer in any danger.>

<I understand. What course of action do you propose, Major?>

This time, Travas answered without missing a beat, <We have a car and a truck in our possession. We will head directly to Azay before crossing the Lutoni.>

<I take it that you do not plan to go back for Treize and the passengers on the other train? We have no idea who is hiding among them, or what he will do,> Hilda said angrily.

<That's correct, Miss. That is not part of our mission,> Major Travas said calmly.

<Let me ask again. Do you have no intention of going back to protect Treize or Lillianne? Do you mean to say that you cannot take on that task?>

<Yes. That is *not* part of our mission.>

Hilda seemed become calm, then. <I understand. Your sole mission is to protect me. You spend the people's precious tax money and sometimes even take human lives to ensure my well-being. That's perfectly natural. I understand. I understand very clearly.>

Hilda's voice grew smaller and smaller until it seemed to fade away at the end. Yzma stared awkwardly.

Then.

"Hm?"

Hilda smiled and met Yzma's gaze. He was taken aback.

<Can you drive?> she asked, holding down the talk button.

As Major Travas and the team cringed in unison, Yzma responded—quiet in volume but clearly audible.

<Y-yes, of course. But—>

<Then I shall name you my personal driver.>

<P-personal driver? I'm not sure I understand, Miss.>

<I shall now set out to rescue the passengers on the other train. This shouldn't be a problem so long as I am not the target, correct?>

Yzma gaped for several seconds before bursting into laughter.

With Yzma's laughter in the background, Hilda spoke into the microphone.

<Did you hear that, everyone?>

<Miss—I mean, Your Highness. Please listen to me. Even if the mastermind is not targeting you—>

The heir to the throne of Bezel cut off the major with a solemn voice.

<O Knight of House Travas—blood of the courageous heroes at the head of battle—you shall accompany the princess wherever she goes if you wish to carry out your mission. But you are free to turn tail and run.>

Major Travas stopped before the train, stunned into silence.

"You lose, Major," Uno snickered, giving him a pat on the shoulder as he passed by.

Next to the train was a truck and a car.

The men transported their suitcases from the train to the truck with practiced ease. The train was emptied in the blink of an eye.

Major Travas sat in the passenger seat of the car, and Uno in the driver's seat. In the back was Ann, holding the sniper rifle and scope.

Ed sat in the bed of the truck with an assault rifle in hand. Ozette was in the driver's seat, and Yzma sat in the passenger seat with Hilda sitting in between them.

Hilda, equipped with a spare radio, pressed the talk button.

<Matilda of Bezel shall now depart to rescue Treize of Ikstova and everyone on the train, save for the culprit. My protectors—>

Hilda paused.

“Yes, ma'am?” Ozette asked quietly.

<—Thank you.>

The truck and the car began traveling south at almost the limits of their speed.

Inside the truck, which was by no means comfortable,

“I'm terribly sorry about earlier,” Hilda said, looking over the scratches on Yzma's face and neck.

“Not at all, Your Highness. It's practically a mark of honor! It'll be the talk of the family for generations,” Yzma snickered.

“Your great-aunt, Madame Berstein, is my flower-arranging instructor. Next time we have tea together, I'll have to tell her that I made her nephew scream.” Hilda smiled.

Yzma's jaw dropped. “Wait, did I—did I tell you? The major would never have... Did you know about me, Your Highness?”

“No. But I can see it in your eyes. The Berstein blood runs thick in your appearance.”

“...Incredible! I suppose I should've expected no less from a princess,” Yzma said with a grin, as though he were chatting with a friend.

The man in the driver's seat chimed in gravely. “If I may, Miss. This might be the perfect opportunity to give this audacious young aristocrat a lesson in real etiquette.”

\* \* \*

A little earlier.

“I see. Excuse me. I suppose I must've gotten my Roxchean mixed up.”

With that, the long-haired man winked and came back into the car.

Allison glanced up at him, then looked back.

The man walked down the aisle between the weary passengers. He went out the door on the opposite end and went into the bathroom.

As he stepped out after washing his hands, he nearly ran into the man once called ‘Prisoner 42’. Both men managed to step back before impact.

“Ah, excuse me.”

“Pardon me. ...I’m terribly sorry, but could you lend me a hand?” Prisoner 42 said in Roxchean. He quickly switched to Bezelese. “Excuse me. You’re from Sou Be-Il, yes? If it’s not too much trouble, I’d like some help. I’m looking for something—would you come with me?”

The long-haired man was taken aback.

“Hm... I’m surprised to see so many Bezelese speakers in Roxche. What are you looking for?”

“My pet weasel. The pesky little thing ran off on me.”

“...I understand. Let’s go.”

“Thank you.”

The men headed into the last car of the train.

They walked quickly past the second of the second class cars—which was completely empty—and entered the conductor’s cabin at the end of the train.

Once they were both in the cabin, which was furnished with a small desk and a bed, Prisoner 42 locked the door.

The long-haired man produced a note from his pocket and turned to Prisoner 42.

“So it was you. ...What should I call you?”

Written in Bezelese on the note were the words, ‘Check to see if the brunette is the target’s girlfriend’. Prisoner 42 thought for a moment before responding.

“Well, I suppose you could call me ‘Weasel’.”

“Weasel, then. What’s my next job? Just say the word.”

Weasel smiled and reached over to the shelf over the bed. He pulled down a basket.

“Take care of this.”

When the long-haired man looked inside, he found a sleeping baby.

“Wait, didn’t the woman toss her?”

“That was the plan, but things didn’t quite turn out the way I expected. I managed to tell the woman to hide her instead of throwing her away.”

“Why? Was there a problem?” asked the man.

Weasel replied abashedly, “I spent a lot of money adopting her from a facility in Raputoa, but I didn’t have a lot of time to spare. So she was the only one I could get.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s a *girl*. Her name’s Esther.”

“...Oh. I see. So the rumors were true. ...Then what about the woman on the roof?”

“Nothing to do with this.”

“Ha ha ha. I see. I’ll take her, then. Once the job’s done, I’ll pretend I found her by chance and hand her to the police.”

“Yeah. She’ll be sleeping like, well, a baby. So, what about the task I gave you?” Weasel asked.

“Ah, right. That Lillia girl doesn’t seem to be his girlfriend, but it doesn’t look completely platonic, either. It looked like the guy was trying to protect her. And the girl isn’t just cute—she also speaks Bezelese. Proper as a textbook.”

“Even better. I don’t know who she is, but I’ll be asking her for help. This is getting interesting.”

“What do you want me to do now?” the long-haired man asked expectantly.

Weasel replied without a moment’s hesitation, “Your job’s done.”

“Whoa, wait a second. I’ve come this far helping you out—I might as well go all the way. You got me out of jail and even put up my poor mother in a decent hospital. I can’t—”

“You’re done. I needed your help and I hired you for that, that’s all. Don’t feel obliged—that’s just going to get in my way. Don’t do anything else now. Keep traveling. The money’s under the baby, so take a look at that. Half the money’s yours. The other half’s the baby’s.”

“...But...”

“You’ll do as I say. If not—”

Weasel pulled the sheets off the bed.

The long-haired man went silent.

Cohen lay dead on the bed, his eyes wide open. In his mouth was a note written in Roxchean—‘Good work. Here’s the rest of your pay’.

By his head were four bundles of cash. Each bundle was about a year’s worth of a conductor’s salary.

“All right... I’m done,” the long-haired man said.

Weasel pulled the blanket over the bed again. Then he pulled out another note from his inside pocket. It had been folded in half and folded in the corner again.

“One last note. It’s not an order—think of it as an extra. Once I disappear from the train and the suits come back, read the note. If they never come back, don’t read it—burn it.”

The man received the note.

“All right. You’re full of surprises, so I’m expecting nothing less from this note.”

“I won’t let you down. Just you wait—all the answers are in there.”

Once Weasel left the conductor’s cabin alone, the man stroked the sleeping baby’s face.

“You should thank the gods you were born a girl. ... That man is a terrifying monster.”

The baby seemed to be smiling in her sleep. The man smiled, looking into her face.

“I hope you live a long, happy life, Esther.”

Weasel passed through the second class cars.

Among the tired passengers was Lillia, who was staring blankly out the window. Across the aisle was Treize, who had been stealing sidelong glances at Lillia until he noticed Weasel’s presence.

Weasel wordlessly passed between them and stepped out into the doorway. He glanced at his wristwatch before entering the sleeper car ahead.

He passed through one empty car and entered the one where the old man and the secretary remained.

Once he was at the door, he knocked.

“...Who is it?” the secretary asked suspiciously. Weasel responded in Roxchean.

“I was told the elder in this cabin was feeling unwell. I thought I should check up on him.”

“He’s just fine, thank you. Please leave us.”

Weasel spoke again in front of the locked door.

“I see. I’ll return to the passenger car, then. —Also, Miss Cathy is safe and sound.”

This time, the door opened. Loudly.

And there stood a red-haired woman, glaring daggers at Weasel with tears in her eyes.

“Excuse me.”

Weasel easily pushed her aside and entered the cabin. He closed and securely locked the door behind him.

The old man sat facing the back of the train. The secretary took a seat across from him.

The white-haired old man slowly looked up at Weasel.

“So it was you. You’re the bastard who took my granddaughter hostage. You’re the mastermind behind this foolish commotion.”

Weasel lightly bowed his head.

“Yes. It’s a pleasure to meet you—I am the culprit.”

The old man glared.

“If anything happens to my granddaughter, my men will tear you to pieces and feed you to the dogs. Mark my words.”

“Ha. How terrifying. That is exactly why I didn’t touch a hair on Cathy’s head.”

Weasel pulled out a photograph from his inside pocket and held it out to the old man. The old man was still. His secretary received the photo.

Her expression changed. She handed the photo to the old man.

Finally, the old man’s eyes widened. Then they narrowed again.

In the color photograph were two people. One was the man who had given them the photograph. The other was an eight-year-old girl, the old man’s only grandchild.

The man and the girl were sitting on a bench, beaming at the camera like they were having the time of their lives.

The adorably freckled girl named Cathy held a balloon twisted into the shape of a poodle in her hand, and was wearing a toy crown. In the hazy background was a carousel.

“This was at the Elitèsa fair three days ago. We had a wonderful time. Cathy and I tired ourselves out playing all day. I felt like I was a little boy again.”

“You bastard...”

A vein bulged on the old man’s head. Weasel continued as though chastising him.

“Your subordinates were hopeless. The moment they heard she was abducted, they rushed straight for the hotels, airports, and highways. Cathy and I were right there, enjoying a day in the sun. It was almost sad to watch. Aren’t you ashamed, as their boss?”

“Where is my granddaughter?”

“Ignoring my question? All right. I suppose Cathy must be back at your villa in the Capital District, where her parents are worried sick.”

“What?!”

“I sent her away on a long-distance train for the Capital District two days ago. I saw her off at the platform myself.”

“You sent her alone?”

“Of course not. I hired a woman from a civilian security company. I told her that we had our reasons, and assigned her to protect Cathy. I covered the hefty costs and their train tickets. Don’t worry—I instructed the bodyguard to escort Cathy safely to the villa. Cathy thinks she’s



on a secret trip to surprise her family, so she probably hasn't done anything to stand out. I was so happy to see how clever she was."

The old man and the secretary glared. Weasel shrugged.

"When I saw her off, she said, 'Thanks for playing with me, mister'. And she gave me a kiss on the cheek."

Then, he glanced at his wristwatch.

"Have they exterminated them by now?" he wondered excitably.

The old man breathed a tired sigh. "Enough...there's something wrong with your head. You're insane..."

"I'm not sure I want to hear something like that from a mob boss who killed countless rivals to reach his current standing. I heard your kills were quite messy. What a villain."

"Enough of this. I brought the package, just as you demanded. —Here."

The secretary nodded and pulled out a large suitcase from under her seat. She struggled to lift it onto the seat, before pulling out another suitcase from under the old man's feet and doing the same.

"Please, open them," she said to Weasel. Weasel opened the suitcases and pulled off the cloth covers.

Inside each trunk were three plain cardboard boxes labeled 'MILITARY-GRADE EXPLOSIVES, HANDLE WITH CARE'. Each box was the size of a dictionary.

"Excellent. Not many people can get their hands on things like this. I owe you so much. Thank you—both of you. I couldn't have done it without your cooperation. If anything should happen—"

"Shut your mouth, you miserable dog. What are you planning next?" the old man growled.

"I'm afraid I can't say. Please don't get in my way."

"I could reveal your identity right here and now. I could even murder you myself."

"You can't do that. You wouldn't want the police on your heels, would you? And you have no way of confirming that Cathy really is alive and well. Although you'll know once you reach Azay and make a phone call. She's safe and sound."

The old man glowered.

"I'd like you to go to the second class passenger car and kill time with the other passengers. Act like one of the poor bystanders who were inconvenienced by the delays. If you take an aeroplane tomorrow, you'll see your darling Cathy again in three or four days. As a matter of fact, I have your tickets right here."

Weasel reached into his inside pocket again and drew an airline envelope. This time, the old man took it without a second thought. When he looked inside, he found two tickets for an aeroplane from Azay to the Capital District.

The old man pocketed the envelope.

"That's all for business. Are you feeling better now, sir? I'm going to have you vacate the cabin now. Quickly, please," Weasel said, clapping his hands.

"Go to hell," the old man hissed as he and his secretary left.

"Oh, wait," Weasel stopped the secretary. "Not you. I need you to do something for me."

After the old man passed by her, looking exhausted—

“Hm?”

Lillia, who sat in the aisle-side seat, spotted the red-haired secretary quietly gesturing to her.

The secretary looked devastated as she waved Lillia over from behind the half-open door. Lillia furrowed her brow and got up, approaching the door to the doorway.

“What’s wrong?” Treize asked, getting up and following her.

“Dunno.”

Lillia and Treize stepped out into the doorway. The woman made a troubled face when she saw Treize, and whispered something into Lillia’s ear.

“Oh...okay.” Lillia nodded easily.

Treize asked her what was happening.

“I’m just gonna go to the sleeper car with her for a bit. We need to grab something.”

“What? I’ll go with—”

“It’s fine! We’ll be back.”

Treize was taken aback by Lillia’s glare and the woman’s apologetic expression.

“I’m really sorry to bother you. Thank you.”

“Not at all. It’s only right to help people in need.”

Lillia and the secretary chatted as they crossed the coupling and disappeared into the next car.

Treize wondered if he should follow her, or if he should do as Lillia said.

And in the end, he returned to the second class passenger car.

Allison, who was sitting alone on the left-side seat, looked up.

“What happened?”

“Oh. Lillia went to help the secretary lady get something from her cabin. ...Should I go after them?”

“Nah, it’s not like she’s going alone,” Allison said.

The brakes kicked in. The wheels screeched as the car lurched forward.

“Whoa.”

Treize quickly grabbed the back of a seat.

The train slowed to half its original speed, then swung to the right.

“Ah!”

“What the?”

“Whoa!”

The passengers began to murmur. Treize desperately tried not to lose his balance. Allison’s head lightly hit the window frame.

“What’s happening?”

“We passed a junction,” Allison said, pointing at the window on the right side of the train. They could see the tracks heading due north. That was the line they were supposed to be taking. It grew smaller and smaller in the distance. “We just turned left.”

Treize paled. “What? That means—”

“Yeah.”

The brakes continued screaming all the while. The train slowed more and more.

“D’you think the driver’s noticed?” asked Treize. Allison nodded.

Soon the train came to a complete stop. In the distance, they could still see the tracks they were originally supposed to take.

“Thank goodness we’ve stopped. But what are these tracks? I don’t think there was a junction on the Lor line.”

Allison soon answered Treize’s question. It was almost the exact reply Wilhelm Schultz had given Treize’s mother in the past. “This is a military-exclusive line. Almost all the tracks that go west from the main north-south line are for military use. Although you won’t find them marked on the map.”

“I see.”

“There’s a Confederation Air Force base nearby, and ahead of that is a whole mess of junctions branching off all the way to the border. They were built to transport personnel and supplies or railroad guns. Although they’re barely in use these days.”

“So we ended up on one of those branches by mistake.”

“The operations office might have confused us for a military train because we’re running late. Or maybe it’s just a silly mistake. Either way, it’s the office’s fault. Looks like it’s just one delay after another.”

All the passengers, save for the long-haired man who remained in the conductor’s cabin, were furious.

“I’ve had it up to here with Confederation Rail!”

“Hurry up and move this train!”

“I want to see the conductor!”

There was nothing surprising about their anger.

The door at the back of the car opened, and the long-haired man returned as if nothing had ever happened.

He noticed the old man—who had not been there earlier—sitting alone in a partitioned seat.

The old man’s hands were clenched together. He was holding back his rage.

“Poor guy,” the long-haired man mumbled in Bezelese.

A little earlier.

Around the time the train passed the junction, Lillia was collapsed in the corridor of the second class sleeper car.

Her long hair covered her face. Standing over her was Weasel.

The secretary was trembling before him.

“Good work,” he said, putting something resembling an oxygen mask over her mouth.

In three seconds, the secretary fell unconscious. With his left arm Weasel held her up, and tossed the mask he had used out the window.

With the secretary in his arms, Weasel stepped into the doorway. He waited for the train to stop before opening the door and stepping onto the tracks.

There were nothing but flat plains on either side of the straight military-use line. He quickly laid the woman on the grass-spotted dirt.

“One last message.”

He drew an envelope out of his pocket and placed it on the secretary's chest, before folding her hands over the envelope.

"It finally begins. Please let this work..."

Weasel leapt back into the doorway and broke into a run. He sprinted at full speed through the empty second class sleeper car and all the way to the coupling at the very back.

Then he expertly began to decouple the cars.

He peeled off the connecting cover around the coupling and pulled back the footboard. Then he separated the electric cables and the pneumatic tubes. Finally, he unscrewed the connector and unhooked the ring.

By the time he was finished, Weasel was sweating, his hands covered in grease.

He jumped back into the doorway and reached for the garbage bin installed there. With his grease-covered hands he pulled out a radio, one similar to the model Major Travas's team used.

<Start the locomotive,> he said quickly.

<Right,> someone replied. Several seconds later, the car began to shake.

The locomotive linked only to the dining car and the two second class sleeper cars slowly began moving down the military-use line.

When the cars came uncoupled, there was a large clatter. That was followed by the sound of the train moving.

The sound carried to the stopped passenger car.

"Huh?" Treize frowned.

"Damn it!"

Allison leapt to her feet. She shoved Treize aside as he tried to stand and rushed into the doorway.

"Whoa!"

Treize quickly regained his footing and hurried after her. Once he was in the doorway, he stared at the same direction as Allison.

"...What the...?"

Beyond Allison's head of golden hair Treize could see the train disappearing into the distance.

"Hey! Lillia's—"

Treize finally understood.

Allison jumped onto the tracks. Treize followed. The train was already too far. They had no hope of catching up on foot.

"He got us..." Allison breathed, her voice mingling with the sound of the train departing.

The sky was as spotless as ever. The sun had set further, now halfway between noon and dusk. It shone upon the four abandoned cars and the two people standing ahead of them.

"How? What in the world is going on here?" Treize wondered.

Allison thought in silence, her hand on her chin and her eyes narrowed.

"Hey! What...what just happened here?!" a man cried from behind them.

It was the suit-clad man. He jumped onto the ground. He was followed by the soldier and the saleswoman.

Treize turned to the passengers. “The locomotive, the dining car, and the two sleeper cars have gone without us.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure.”

Allison turned. “Mechanical failure and driver error, along with my daughter being called to the other side. It’s an unfortunate accident—*if* this really is just a coincidence.”

“What’s going on, ma’am? What happened here? If there’s anything I can do to help—” the soldier began, stepping forward, but Allison raised an arm to stop him.

“Hey! What’s that over there! By the tracks! It’s a person!”

The voice belonged to the long-haired man, who was late to step into the doorway. Because he was speaking Bezelese, only Allison and Treize responded.

They spotted the fallen secretary simultaneously.

“That’s the woman who called Lillia away!” Treize said just as Allison broke into a run.

When the passengers asked what was happening, Treize briefly explained the situation in Roxchean and followed Allison.

The soldier and the suit-clad man joined him.

“Hey! Can you hear me?” Allison cried, looking at the secretary.

There was no answer. Allison slapped her several times, but she did not move. Allison put her fingers on the secretary’s neck and over her mouth to check her pulse and breathing.

“How is she?” asked Treize, running over. Allison turned.

“I think someone knocked her out with some sort of drug.”

“Thank goodness she’s still alive. What about Lillia?”

Allison shook her head.

Treize glared at the tracks the train had departed down and gritted his teeth. “So it wasn’t an accident after all...”

The rest of the passengers followed, asking Treize what was happening. Treize had no idea how to respond.

“...Hm?”

Allison noticed the envelope on the woman’s chest. When she picked it up, she saw the words on the envelope. One simple line in Roxchean. ‘To the noble of Ikstova’.

Allison quickly slipped the envelope into her pocket. Then she turned to the passengers.

“I need some people to carry her into the cars!” she ordered.

Several men nodded and lifted the secretary off the ground. For a few seconds there was a small argument about who would get to lift her slender legs.

Watching the men carry away the secretary, Allison checked to see that no one was around and went to Treize. She showed him the envelope. “This was on the secretary. It’s for the prince.”

Treize took the envelope without a word. When he saw the words on the envelope, his expression became grave. Treize checked that the envelope was unsealed and opened it. Inside was a letter. He unfolded it.

The letter was written in Bezelese, with excellent handwriting to boot. Treize read the letter aloud.

“To the young, noble, and beautiful prince of Ikstova.

“By the time you read this letter, the brunette will be with me. Are you surprised? I suppose that’s only natural.

“If you wish to take back the girl you cherish, come after me by car. Follow the tracks. Make sure to bring a radio with you—I’ve included the frequency below.

“There’s no need to rush. The train is cruising slowly, so you’ll catch up in no time.

“I’m waiting with bated breath.

“From the culprit, with love.”

“What the heck?” Treize frowned.

As the men carried the secretary into the train, the soldier suddenly wondered,

“Hm? Where’d the doctor go?”



## **Chapter 8: Rail Tracer**

“Look.”

Treize handed the letter to Allison to prove he was not lying—as if to prove that such an absurd message truly existed on that piece of paper. He checked the back of the page as he did so, but it was blank.

Allison read the letter. There was a frequency listed at the bottom, but otherwise it was exactly as Treize had read out loud.

“This was the only letter, right?” Allison said doubtfully, even though she was the one who had found it.

“Anyway, now we *know* Lillia’s been kidnapped! And that, for some reason, the culprit’s after me! That coward!” Treize spat, ignoring the letter.

Allison read the letter again.

“‘Prince’... I see. So that’s what’s happening...”

“What do you mean?”

“This mastermind of ours knows who you are, Treize. He’s definitely not a run-of-the-mill civilian.”

“Oh...”

It was only then that Treize understood.

“First, calm down,” Allison said, handing back the letter. Prince Treize of Ikstova took it with a quiet ‘Yes’.

“So he’s after you... I get it now. That’s what it was all leading up to. The mastermind boarded your train and caused a commotion to separate you from the guards. Since the team’s going to cross the border soon, they can’t bring any Roxcheans along, right? They would obviously leave you behind. We’re dealing with a smart man here. And a Westerner, too.”

“That’s why he took Lillia hostage? He thought it out that far?”

“No, I think kidnapping Lillia must have been a spur-of-the-moment decision. He must have decided to use her when he saw that you two were friends. I think he might have originally been trying to carry out his plans after switching the train to this line. He could assassinate you alone, or he could destroy the train completely. That might be the best way to get rid of evidence. In other words, Lillia saved the lives of me and everyone else on the train,” Allison said matter-of-factly.

Treize made a face.

“Oh. Sorry, Treize. I’ve been thinking more like a certain someone a lot these days.”

“I-it’s all right. ...So what should I do? He said I should come after the train by car...but how? And where would I get a radio?” Treize asked.

Not even Allison could answer that question. There was nothing on the plains around them.

“This guy’s out of his mind! If he could plan things so far in advance, the least he could have done was prepare me a car!” Treize cried angrily. A car honked in the distance.

A car and a truck crossed the northbound tracks, which the train was originally supposed to take.

“N-no way!” Treize gasped.

“Incredible,” Allison commented.

As the car and the truck drew near, the faces of the people inside became visible. It was Major Travas and his team. Even Hilda was there, sitting in the truck.

The men who had carried away the secretary had come outside again. The cars stopped in front of them. The team, armed with guns, stepped outside.

“Whoa, they’re back,” the passengers muttered, stepping away, but Treize ran over to them.

“I’m glad to see you’re safe, Your Highness,” said Major Travas, “We’ve figured out that the culprit is after—”

“Me! And he took Lillia hostage!”

Major Travas went silent.

“Here!”

He received the letter and read through it with a grave expression.

“Hm. So he took off on the separated train. By any chance, do you know who the culprit is?”

“No. But once we do a head count of the passengers we’ll figure out who’s missing—”

“Wonder what they’re talking about.”

“Who knows?”

The passengers listened to the conversation from about 20 meters away.

Suddenly, Treize turned. So did Major Travas. Two sets of eyes were suddenly on the passengers.

Behind Treize and Major Travas stood the team in black, armed with guns. And beside them was a woman with golden hair, who seemed to have come from another world altogether.

“Who is that woman? Did you see her on the train?”

“No. Wonder who she is...”

Hearing the exchange between the suit-clad man and the soldier,

“...Oh.”

The long-haired man remembered something and took out the note he had received from Weasel. He hid it in the palm of his hand and read the ‘answer’.

His hand trembled. The note fell to the ground. A middle-aged man in a suit noticed and reached for it.

“Sir, you dropped—”

The long-haired man squeezed past the passengers and broke into a run.

Uno and Yzma reacted quickly to the sudden movement. Uno fired one round from his assault rifle, held at waist-level. Yzma stood protectively in front of Hilda.

Treize, who was about to point out how to find the culprit, flinched when he heard the gunshot and spotted the rushing man. Major Travas quickly stepped in front of him.

At the same time, the long-haired man stopped. With several meters between himself and Hilda, the man knelt and touched his forehead to the muddy ground deferentially.

“What the heck?”

“What’s he doing?”

The passengers were confused.

The long-haired man remained bowing on the ground, trembling in admiration as he declared loudly enough to beat even the gunfire—

“Princess Matilda! To think I would have the honor of gazing upon your beautiful countenance in a place like this! As a citizen of Bezel, it is truly an honor. Truly! I am humbled to be in your presence!”

The passengers didn’t understand a word, as the man was speaking Bezelese.

“What’s he saying?”

“Dunno.”

The man who picked up the note tried to read what was on it, but he gave up as soon as he saw it was in Bezelese.

Weasel’s final note said,

‘The men in black are members of the Royal Army’s special forces who are working at the embassy in Roxche’s Capital District. They are guarding Princess Matilda, who is heading incognito to Lor. They will come to the train by car if things go as planned. Should you have the chance to see the princess in person, make certain you do not offend her.’

Watching one man’s patriotism on full display,

“Simple. We can just ask him,” Major Travas said plainly.

“Yes!”

Treize went up to the man and pulled back his head by his long hair.

“Ow— Ah!”

When the long-haired man looked up, he saw Treize’s glare and a gun pointed at his face.

“Come with us,” Ed said quietly, looming like a mountain over him.

The long-haired man was taken behind the truck.

“It looks like he was in cahoots with the culprit. Those people are going to interrogate him now,” Allison said to the passengers, reading the note he had dropped.

“Is this even allowed? They’re not even police.”

“Yeah!”

“Isn’t this a violation of human rights?”

The passengers grumbled, dissatisfied.

“It sure is. Why don’t you go take it up with them?” Allison replied.

No one said a word.

The man was dragged behind the truck and sat forcibly next to the tires, his hands bound. For a time he looked up at the sky aglow with dusk, as though averting his gaze from the gun pointed at him.

But when Hilda stepped towards him, he broke into an almost foolish grin. Tears fell from his eyes.

“We would like to ask you some questions.”

“Ohh...I am not worthy, Your Highness! I am but a criminal—”

“Enough!” Treize growled. “Who is the mastermind? The one who kidnapped Lillia! Who is he?”

Major Travas lightly pulled the slide of his handgun to make sure it was loaded.

“Will you tell us everything you know?”

His tone alone was as gentle as ever.

Beads of sweat formed on the man’s forehead. Finally, Hilda smiled at him. The man was euphoric.

“Ahh...this must be paradise...”

“Please. Tell us,” Hilda said.

“Yes. Of course, Your Highness,” the man replied, bowing again.

“The mastermind is called Prisoner 42,” said the man.

Major Travas grimaced. His subordinates began whispering amongst themselves.

“Him?”

“Of all the people...”

“I guess he’s the right man for the job. In a really sick way.”

“Revolting.”

Uno, Ozette, Yzma, and Ann each commented on the revelation.

Treize and Hilda, meanwhile, were oblivious.

“Prisoner 42? Who is that?” Treize asked Major Travas.

“Prisoner 42...” Major Travas trailed off. But one look from the prince and the princess was enough to spur him to continue. “...Prisoner 42 is one of the most notorious criminals in the history of Sou Be-Il. He was arrested four years ago and was sentenced to 420 years in prison. ‘Prisoner 42’ has been his moniker since then.”

“What was his crime?” Treize asked the obvious question. Major Travas’s reply was mechanical and emotionless.

“Serial murder. In the span of 10 years, he took the lives of more than 60 people and desecrated and disposed of their bodies.”

“Sixty people...?”

Treize was stunned.

“And also...” Major Travas trailed off again.

As the major hesitated, the long-haired man chimed in. “Prisoner 42 is the perfect man for this job.”

Treize turned. He looked down to find the long-haired man smiling coldly.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’d be happy to answer. But don’t say I didn’t warn you, boy.”

“I won’t have time for that. Spill everything you know about him.”

“You’ve got guts. But before that—Your Highness. This will only disgust you. If you could step away while I explain—”

The man remained considerate of Hilda, no matter the circumstance.

“Please tell us now. There’s no time,” Hilda replied coolly.

The man looked downcast, but he soon met Treize’s glare. “Listen up, boy. Prisoner 42 is a deviant. He prefers people like you.”

“What? What do you mean by that?” Treize frowned. The man smirked.

“Each and every one of his five-dozen victims was a pretty little boy.”

Treize cringed. The man continued, almost enjoying and taking pride in the telling.

“He doesn’t kill innocent women. And he has no interest in grown men. His targets have always been young, pretty boys—as young as one and as old as 18. Sometimes he lured them into his home with words. Sometimes he targeted hitchhikers. Other times, he resorted to kidnapping.”

Treize listened on in horror.

“When he was arrested, they found detailed records of his crimes. He toyed with his victims until they died. He loved them in his own way—he was only ever aroused by young boys.”

“Ugh...”

Treize was disgusted. Hilda listened with a grave look on her face.

“Supposedly, the police couldn’t bring themselves to announce the state of the bodies they found. He stuffed them, experimented on them, chewed off their flesh, turned them inside-out... I heard *stories* in prison. Would you like me to tell you the rest? Once I’m done, you wouldn’t want to get within a thousand-kilometer radius of him.”

Treize was silent.

“He’s not just a crazed lunatic. He was hailed as a child prodigy. He mastered Roxchean at 12, entered university at 14, and earned his medical license at 18. When he was conscripted, he served as a medic. And until he was arrested, he worked as a physician at a famous hospital. No one suspected a thing, even when children around him were going missing one after another. When he was arrested, one patient even claimed it was a police conspiracy. Said someone like him could never do such a thing. If a demented old man hadn’t gotten into a traffic accident with the sick bastard with a body still in the trunk of his car, he would never have been caught.”

“... Thanks.”

“Oh? For what? I’m curious to know,” the man said provocatively.

“Now I know he wouldn’t kill Lillia. I’m feeling a lot better now. Now I can go after him without worries. I’ll accept his challenge,” Treize said with a smile. Hilda and the man stared.

Treize ignored their gazes and turned to Major Travas.

“Major Travas of the Royal Army!”

“Yes, Your Highness!” Major Travas replied, standing up straight.

“I’ll be borrowing that car of yours. Along with a sniper rifle and one of your radios. Put it on Queen Francesca’s tab. I’ll go grab my jacket!” Treize said in Roxchean, and ran back to the train without even waiting for an answer.

Hilda watched Treize run towards the train. The long-haired man addressed her.

“Please, don’t look so upset, Princess Matilda! You look most beautiful when you smile like—mph!”

“Shut up,” Yzma growled, gagging him.

“Mmph!”

“Thank you for the information,” Hilda said.

The man began writhing, tears streaming down his face.

“Mmph! Mmmmp!”

“Is that supposed to be a ‘you’re welcome’?” Yzma said snidely, gently pushing Hilda away from the long-haired man.

Major Travas’s team and Hilda gathered together. Uno spoke first.

“I find it hard to believe Prisoner 42 managed to escape by himself. He has no possessions or savings to make use of, and his parents already committed suicide.”

Major Travas nodded. “Clearly there is someone pulling the strings behind the scenes. Someone arranged the escape, is financing this plot, and is feeding our culprit information.”

“But there’s only one person I can think of who could legally pull him out of prison—the Minister of Justice,” said Ozette.

“Then he’s gotta be the one,” Yzma said. Ozette stared at him in disbelief. But,

“I believe so,” Major Travas agreed. “The current Minister of Justice is Duke Besser. He’s certainly in a position to know about Prince Treize’s existence. Duke Besser has a son from his second wife. The boy is only 10, but everyone agrees that he will be a strong contender for Princess Matilda’s hand in marriage.”

Hilda gasped first. Then followed the rest, save for Yzma.

Yzma treated it as someone else’s problem—which it technically was—and nodded enthusiastically. “I see. So that’s why he’s trying to eliminate Prince Treize. The duke wants his own son to marry the future queen. Simple and clear!”

“I see... I had an inkling that this might be the case, but to think that this truly was the answer...” Hilda trailed off, averting her gaze. Yzma spoke up brightly.

“Aww, no need to get down, Miss Hilda.”

“I’m just about ready to arrest you for lese-majesty...” Ozette remarked scathingly. Ann asked him what was wrong. Ozette brushed it off.

“May I?” Allison spoke up, as casual as though she were inviting herself to a dinner.

Major Travas allowed her to join the conversation. None of the subordinates said anything. When Hilda met her eyes, Allison greeted her with a smile. Hilda returned the greeting.

Major Travas briefly explained the situation to Allison.

“Oh dear. So the sweet-looking doctor was the culprit. He didn’t look it at all.”

“So it *was* the doctor. Sou Be-Il should really start publicizing photographs of criminals...” Major Travas sighed.

That was when Treize leapt out of the train. He was wearing a leather jacket over his sweater. Around his waist was his usual belt pack.

“I’ll be right back!” he cried, running straight for the car.

Major Travas held out his arms to stop him, responding in Roxchean, “It’s too dangerous, Your Highness. We won’t be able to protect you directly.”

“I know,” Treize replied immediately.

Major Travas lowered his arms and ordered his team to prepare the car, two radios, a sniper rifle, and extra magazines.

“Thank you,” Treize said. That was when Hilda came up to him.

“Treize.”

He turned.

“Please. Don’t try to stop me,” he said firmly.

“I won’t,” Hilda replied without missing a beat. “Go. Save Lillia. Rescue your princess. That is the duty of a prince. There’s no time to lose.”

Treize’s eyes widened. Hilda slowly walked up to him and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Fortune be with you.”

She gave him a soft kiss on the forehead.

Treize turned his belt pack to the side and strapped a small radio to his stomach. He tuned the radio to the right frequency, wrapped the microphone around his neck, and put an earpiece into his right ear.

“We will do whatever we can to support you so long as we can continue to communicate,” said Major Travas, “If the train is still moving, activate the emergency brake at the coupling. And once you’re finished, head to the driver’s seat—there should be a more powerful radio there.”

“Right. Thank you,” Treize replied.

Finally, Treize received a long automatic sniper rifle. He checked that it was loaded before arming the safety. Then he slipped two extra magazines into his jacket.

Treize stepped into the car. He placed the rifle in the passenger seat, secured it, and started the car.

He stepped on the clutch with his left foot and changed gears with his right hand. The moment he stepped onto the gas pedal, he violently let go of the clutch.

The car began to race across the plain, scattering mud in its wake.

It climbed onto the gravel under the tracks, with the left side of the car between the rails.

“Here I go!”

Treize began to chase the train.

A pair of emerald-green eyes watched the car until it was too far to see.

Meanwhile, the woman with blue eyes—

“Let’s head out, too. We can take the truck. The lady should come along—there’s going to be sufficient protection there. And I’m sure we can just leave the passengers here,” she said out of nowhere. Major Travas furrowed his brow.

“Where are you suggesting we go?”

“Someplace nearby,” Allison replied.

\* \* \*

“...Huh?”

Slowly, Lillia opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was the ceiling of the corridor.

The sunlight filtered through the window on her right, casting a yellow light on the walls and ceiling.

The train was moving slowly.

She could feel on her back the dampened roar and the rhythm of the wheels grinding against the tracks.

“Ah, you’re awake,” said a gentle voice, in Bezelese.

“Oh!”

Lillia quickly looked up at the corridor. There stood a black-haired man in his thirties—the man who, on the train, had been carrying a medical bag.

He was still in the same grey suit, but his glasses were gone. There was a radio strapped to his waist and a microphone was wrapped around his neck.

‘It’s you!’ Lillia tried to say, but—

“Mmph! Mmm!”

That was all she could manage.

It was only then that Lillia realized she was gagged and that her hands were bound.

“Mm! MMPH!”

“Hey! Let me go!’ Right?” the man guessed, amused.

Then he did as Lillia demanded and released her. He pulled away the gag and gently sat her up by her shoulders. “There. Better?”

“Hey, you!”

Lillia tried to rise to her feet, but she realized that her ankles were also bound. She squirmed around and looked the man in the eye.

The man looked down at her and introduced himself.

“Please call me ‘Weasel’. I am the one behind today’s commotion.”

“What?”

“You are my hostage.”

“Wha— You’d better not be mistaking me for a princess!” Lillia cried. The events of the new year’s party were still fresh in her mind.

“No, nothing like that. But I must say I’m surprised to see how much you know, Lillia,” Weasel replied, assuming that Lillia was talking about Hilda.

“You’re the one who knocked me, out, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. But don’t worry—I took care to use drugs that wouldn’t leave any side effects. Doesn’t that make you feel a lot better?”

“Ugh! What are you planning?”

“Right now, this train is slowly cruising northwest along a barely-used military line. Other than the bodies, the two of us are the only people onboard.”

“Answer my question.”

“Calm down. I’m only just beginning. I left Treize a message telling him to follow us if he wants to rescue you. I don’t see him yet, but I’m sure he’ll be coming sooner or later.”

“Treize? You took me hostage to get *Treize*? Why? Why are you after him?”

Weasel shrugged. “Hmm... Yes. Yes. That’s a secret. And that’s a secret too.”

“What?”

“I just answered your questions. I am trying to kill Treize, but I can’t tell you why. Call it professionalism. Although I will tell you once it’s too late. I may enjoy dramatic pauses, but I’m not really one to keep secrets.”

Lillia said nothing. So Weasel went silent.

Three seconds later.

Unable to stand the silence, Lillia burst out,





“Say something!”

“Say something?” Weasel repeated, falling into thought. “Then let me tell you about myself.”

“What?”

“You know, I wasn’t abused as a child or left brain-damaged by an illness or accident,” Weasel said, as though delivering a soliloquy.

Lillia did not know what to say. She listened quietly.

“When I was arrested, countless psychiatrists came to me, day after day. They wanted to write papers about me—asked me all kinds of trivial questions. ‘What did you listen to on the radio as a child?’, ‘Did you ever collect insects as a hobby?’, ‘What kind of food did you eat every day?’ But I didn’t have a very remarkable upbringing. I was just an ordinary boy who loved to study, though a little more clever than most.”

Lillia listened on.

“I know that murder is bad. I know that it is illegal. But I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it so much. It made me feel alive. I didn’t understand—why didn’t other people try to break free from the chains of the law? Why didn’t they do everything in their power to commit murder while avoiding discovery? Even now, I wonder why.”

Weasel seemed to be genuinely considering the conundrum. Lillia was stunned.

“All I know is that you’re a killer from Sou Be-Il. But why do you want me to know all this? What are you trying to tell me?”

“Yes! It’s almost time for my fight with Treize! The whole point of this trip! This is why I’ve been working toward! Yes!”

Weasel’s musing turned to sudden enthusiasm. Lillia frowned.

“...Are you listening to me?”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“Never mind...”

As Lillia stared incredulously,

“Wait for me, Lillia!”

Treize was shouting in the driver’s seat.

The gravel and railroad ties underneath resulted in quite a bumpy ride.

The tracks stretched into the horizon. The train was still out of sight. The sun was tilting west, slowly growing dim. It would be sunset soon—then would come a spring evening.

Treize put even more weight into the gas pedal. He sped up to the limit and held down the steering wheel as it threatened to spin. His black hair shook in the wind.

And—

“There!”

A small speck appeared in the distance. It was just on the horizon.

Treize slowed down slightly and took one hand off the steering wheel. He pressed the talk button on his neck.

<Prisoner 42! Can you hear me?! I’ve come alone, just as you demanded!>

“Ah! Such passion! Such drive! I’m not sure I can take much more of this!”

Out of nowhere, the man began to squirm and raise his voice.

“Eek!”

Lillia desperately looked away, having never felt so disturbed in all her life.

Weasel squirmed for a short time, but soon his expression became serious and he pressed the talk button. <Yes! I hear you, Treize! I hear your lovely voice!>

<Enough! I’ve almost caught up to you!> Treize quickly replied. But Lillia didn’t hear him. All she heard was—

<Ahh! Come faster! Quickly! Let me see your face!> Weasel cried ecstatically.

<You got it! So stop the train!> Treize cried, one hand on the steering wheel.

The train was about 200 meters ahead, traveling at about 30 kilometers per hour. Treize could clearly see the last car of the separated train.

<I can’t do that.>

<What?! What’s your game?>

<It’s not a game. The driver’s dead. I bribed him with a large sum, but he could have panicked if things had gone wrong. So I killed him before he could. His body’s weighing down the lever right now. It was tough to position it just right to maintain this speed, but I managed with some wisdom and effort. Isn’t that incredible of me?>

Though astounded, Treize continued to close the distance. There were 40 meters left.

<So hurry and come over to the train. I’ll be waiting. End transmission.>

Weasel did not even ask for Treize’s opinion before cutting off the transmission.

“Shit! All right, fine!”

Treize slammed on the gas pedal. The car shook even more and sped up, and the train was closer than ever.

A second before the car could hit the train, Treize operated the gas pedal just right to match the train’s speed.

Treize lightly bumped into the shock absorbers at the back of the last car. At the same time, he took his foot off the gas pedal to stand—

“Whoa!”

The engine brake kicked in, instantly slowing the car and widening the gap. If he had climbed onto the hood and tried to jump, he would have fallen.

“Right...calm down...”

Treize stepped down on the gas pedal again and glared at the train for several seconds. The gaping door seemed to beckon to him.

“I have to do this...”

Face set in grim determination, Treize took his foot slightly off the gas pedal. The train quickly moved further away.

Then he sped up again. The car began to close the gap. This time, fast enough to crash.

There were several meters to go.

Stepping down on the clutch, Treize shifted gears to neutral. The car moved towards the train with inertia alone.

Treize stood from his seat. He gave up the sniper rifle in the passenger seat and jumped over the windshield, landing on the hood of the car.

“Hah!”

With a cry, he leapt off the hood and into the door of the train.

Treize was still in midair when the car crashed into the train. He heard the crunch of metal against metal behind him.

Slowly, he was sucked into the door. His feet hit the doorway floor. And he landed. But he had jumped with such force that he lost his balance.

“Whoa!”

Treize crashed straight into the door, squealing like a crushed frog.

“Ugh...”

He hit his head, nose, stomach, and hands and feet as he fell into the doorway.

That was when he heard something behind him. Treize turned slightly.

The driverless car had left the tracks and was flipping onto its side. The sniper rifle in the passenger seat slipped out of the seatbelt and flew into the air. Both the car and the rifle disappeared at 30 kilometers an hour.

“No turning back...” Treize said, spitting out the contents of his mouth. Blood splattered on the floor. “Just you wait...”

Slowly, he stood. He checked to see that his limbs and neck were still functional.

“All right...”

His only injury was a torn lip. Once he had confirmed his own well-being, Treize took a deep breath.

Then he used the radio.

<I’m here!>

<I’m here!>

When Weasel heard Treize’s voice, he cast a euphoric gaze into the air.

<I’m here!>

When Lillia heard Treize’s voice, she urged him under her breath to hurry.

## **Chapter 9: My Prince**

At the coupling, Treize found the emergency brake.

The yellow lever was high up on the wall of the car. Treize grabbed it and pulled.

Nothing happened.

He raised it and pulled it down again. Yet again, it did nothing. The train continued to slowly cruise down the tracks.

“He’s really gone all-out here...”

Treize gave up on the emergency brake and clung to the wall by the door into the corridor.

“Where are you hiding...?” he whispered.

<Excellent! This is so exciting!>

Weasel’s voice came over the radio. Treize pressed the talk button. <I’m here! Where are you? Show yourself!>

<Aah! I’m almost feeling faint from all this emotion! I’m at the dining car at the front of the train—along with the girl.>

<I want to hear her voice.>

<Of course. ...Could you say something, Miss?>

Then,

<It’s me! I’m here! I’m not hurt!>

Lillia sounded as spunky as ever. For a moment, Treize smiled.

<I’ll be waiting,> the man said. And he ended the transmission.

“What to do...what am I supposed to do?” Treize wondered to himself at the coupling. “Am I all right to go?”

He spat out blood again.

Slowly, Treize opened the door and stepped into the corridor. The corridor followed the left wall of the train.

Treize took a low stance and gazed down the hall. There was no one there. The dining car was two cars ahead.

He made up his mind and stepped forward—

“Huh?”

For a second, he spotted something glinting in the corridor. It was about 3 meters ahead.

Something was floating across the corridor, glinting in the setting sun. Upon closer examination, Treize realized that it was a very thin wire tied at shin-level.

Treize stepped back out into the coupling.

He looked around and spotted a fire extinguisher.

Removing the elastic band securing the fire extinguisher, Treize picked it up and stepped into the corridor.

“Take this!”

He hurled it down the corridor.

The fire extinguisher bounced on the carpet once, then rolled down the hall. It tripped the wire.

A second later, a crossbow bolt came shooting from the right. With an audible whoosh, it drove itself deep into the corridor wall. “Shit!” Treize swore. If he hadn’t noticed the trap, he would have taken a crossbow bolt to the shin.

“So he’s not trying to *kill* me. Sick bastard...”

Treize looked up at the ceiling.

There was a firing mechanism in the cabin the bolt had come from.

The wire in the corridor had been connected to the trigger of a miniature crossbow set up under the seat.

Next to the crossbow was a mechanism made up of a long match, a small wine bottle, and a piece of cloth. It was set up to catch fire when the bolt was released.

The firing mechanism began to burn.

A thin wisp of smoke rose to the ceiling. Smoke quickly filled the cabin.

Treize exited the car.

From the coupling at the very back of the train, Treize climbed up the railings and footholds onto the roof.

He peered over the edge of the roof. His bangs shook in the wind. Once he was sure no one was there, Treize climbed all the way to the rooftop.

The maintenance walkway on the roof was slightly sloped at the edges. And because the train was shaking, one misstep could lead to a slip and a very fatal fall.

Treize bent down and began to creep down the middle of the walkway. He moved cautiously, so that he would make no noise and be steady even against the wind.

In the dining car.

“That should be enough time,” Weasel said.

“Enough for what?” asked Lillia. She was seated in a chair. Although Weasel had untied the ropes around her ankles, her wrists were still bound.

“I’m terribly sorry about all this,” Weasel said, freeing her hands.

Lillia stared.

“Now, let’s be off. Let’s go meet our prince,” said Weasel.

‘*What, the prince of idiocy?*’ Lillia wondered, but she said nothing as she walked in the direction Weasel pointed her toward—the front of the dining car.

After crossing the last car in the train, Treize leapt over the coupling to the next.

“Hah!”

Out of nowhere, he heard a male voice.

<Splendid! You’ve done well to make it this far, hero!>

Treize looked up.

On the roof of the next car—the dining car—was Lillia.

Just like Treize, she had climbed onto the roof at the coupling between the dining car and the locomotive.

When she saw Treize, Lillia waved her arms. She gathered her hair as it billowed uncontrollably in the wind, and began to creep towards him as though afraid. She had gone about 3 meters when the man who had introduced himself as a doctor suddenly peered over the roof.

<That's right! I'm here!>

Slowly, Treize resumed walking across the car.

The beautiful spring sunset dyed the landscape red.

The train continued straight down the tracks.

At the head was a roaring diesel locomotive. Behind it were three cars.

Atop the first car was a man and a girl.

Atop the second car was a boy.

And at the windows of the third car were faint plumes of white smoke.

Treize pulled a gun out of his belt pack.

It was his favorite, a mid-sized handgun. He disarmed the safety and pressed the talk button on his radio with his left hand.

<I'm here!>

The man responded.

<Ah! How exciting. How exhilarating!>

Treize pressed onward.

Each car was about 25 meters long. He slowly moved to close the 40-meter gap between himself and the man.

Weasel addressed Lillia gently.

"Now, walk. Mind your feet—wouldn't want you to slip and fall."

Lillia gathered her long hair in one bunch and brought it over her shoulder, then tucked the ponytail into her jacket. And she cautiously moved forward.

"Bastard..." Treize swore as he crossed the roof. He could not shoot Weasel because Lillia was in the way.

Soon, he was at the front of the second class sleeper car. Lillia was near the middle of the dining car. Weasel, about 3 meters behind her.

"Lillia! Get down!" Treize yelled. Lillia slowly did. So did Weasel.

Treize grimaced and pointed his gun at the air.

<Now, now. We can't have you using such an unrefined tool like that here,> Weasel said through the radio, still crouching.

"Shut up, you coward!" Treize roared. They were close enough that the radio was no longer necessary, but Weasel made a point of using it.

<Let's keep using the radio. I don't really want to raise my voice,> Weasel said softly, <Now drop the gun. Toss it aside. Just like that. We don't need anything like that between the two of us. I don't like guns, you know. With a bullet, you can't *feel* the sensation of taking a life. The greatest weapon in the world is your *body*, I think. Including your hands. So I want you to throw that gun away.>

"If I refuse..."

<I would prefer not to go against my personal policy. I'm sure you understand?>

"Damn it!"

Treize armed the safety on his gun. "I'll come back for you," he whispered, tossing it aside.

The gun spun slowly as it fell to the plains. It landed in the mud and grew distant.

<You're spunkier than I thought. I can scarcely hold myself back!> Weasel said with a glint in his eye, standing up again. Treize could hear the end of his sentence even without the radio.

"Er...I have a question," Lillia said from her crouching stance, raising her right hand.

"Yes?"

"I can ask, right? So...can I go now?"

"Yes," Weasel replied without a second thought.

"Huh...? Seriously? I can?"

"Yes. Thank you for taking on the job of a hostage. I apologize for getting you involved. I'm terribly sorry."

Lillia was rendered silent.

"Now it's time for me to be alone with my prince. You are free to go."

"Really? ...How?" Lillia asked, looking around.

"You'll have to figure something out," Weasel said firmly.

"What?! What the heck? You want me to *jump* off?"

"I wouldn't recommend it. This may be a muddy plain, but you won't get off unscathed. I suggest you give up."

"Hey!" Lillia bellowed. But realizing that anger would get her nowhere, she quickly turned her rage on Treize.

"Treize! Please do something about this guy!"

"I know! But you can't stay there—you're going to get in the way!"

Lillia looked around, front and back.

"What do you want me to *do*!?"

Weasel ignored her completely and pressed the talk button.

<Treize. I could have killed you any time I wanted back on that train. But I didn't. Part of the reason was that I didn't want to get caught and that it would have been hard to get away. But I could have overcome that if I really wanted to. I could just have killed all the passengers. And even if this hostage plot doesn't work out, I can snipe you in Iks later with ease. But I would prefer not to do that. Do you know why?>

"...No!" Treize lied.

<Then let me tell you. ...Before I kill you, I want to *love* you.>

"Huh?" Lillia frowned. As for Treize—

"Urgh..."

He had expected the answer, but he averted his gaze in disgust anyway.

Weasel held down the talk button with his left hand and spread his right arm. It was trembling in ecstasy.

<The moment I first saw a photo of you, my heart shot through the stratosphere and into the heavens! This was love at first sight! Ah, I thought! Ah, I want to love this boy at all costs! I



want to hold him in my arms...and kill him in my embrace! I want to cover myself in the scent of his blood! I want to feel his warm flesh grow cold against me! That pure desire moved me to cross the Lutoni, mother of life!>

Lillia, still crouching, did everything in her power to get away from the man without looking back at him.

Treize did not know what to say. All he could do was listen to Weasel's voice and the voice coming from the earpiece connected to the radio.

<Now! Aaaah... Come to me! Take off your clothes and come to me! Together, we will dance a romantic waltz!>

Twenty seconds of silence followed.

In that period of time—

“Ah...the sunset's beautiful today,” Treize whispered to himself, trying to escape reality.

Eventually, he brought himself to finally press the talk button. He did his very best to not look at the man.

<And...if I...er...refuse? You're not going to harm Lillia, are you?>

Lillia, meanwhile, was still creeping across the middle of the car.

<No! I don't kill innocent women. But I *will* set off a bomb!>

“What?!”

Treize looked at Weasel. The latter was holding a small device in his right hand. It was about the size of a gun, and had a small antenna sticking out of it. There was a black button near the thumb. Underneath it ran a red wire.

Lillia also turned at the mention of a bomb.

Weasel brandished the object as Lillia and Treize watched.

<This is a detonator. I've loaded an extremely powerful explosive—two truckloads' worth—in the last car. That's enough to blow this entire train to smithereens! All thanks to a certain grandfather and his secretary! Now take off your clothes and come into my arms! If not, I will press this button. Then the bomb will go off in 90 seconds. What is your answer?>

While Weasel was talking, Lillia had crept as quickly as she could. She finally crossed the dining car and arrived at the coupling.

Treize leapt over the coupling and landed on the dining car roof. He stood with his feet spread wide and let Lillia crawl through under his legs.

<You heard me. What do you say?>

The man asked again. Treize had no choice but to respond.

“If I refuse...?”

<Then—I just pressed the button,> Weasel replied, looking at the detonator.

“What?”

<I pressed the button. Now what will you do?>

Treize looked at Weasel's right hand. A red lightbulb on the detonator was flashing.

“Stop! You bastard!”

<That hurts! This is a negotiation, Treize. Take off your clothes and come to me, and I will stop the bomb.>

“You really *are* an idiot...”

<Ha! I do this all in the name of love!>

“You are the biggest idiot on this *continent*.”

<You know what? I won’t hold that against you. You have 75 seconds left. You can try and stop the bomb if you want. You might be able to, if you climb back down and push the suitcases off the train. Although it won’t be easy, since the car should be on fire now. Go on, try and play the hero. ...No. Never mind. Don’t. If you’re going to die, I want you to die before my eyes. Now come here. I’ll stop the bomb, and we’ll all be happy.> Weasel grinned.

“Please do something, Treize,” Lillia pleaded desperately.

“Look, Lillia... I’ve trained myself as much as I could. But...no one ever taught me what I should do against someone as crazy as him,” Treize confessed.

“No...” Lillia breathed.

But at that moment, the roar of an engine began to overpower the diesel locomotive.

The noise came from the direction of the setting sun.

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Weasel, Treize, and Lillia all turned their gazes to the glowing sun. They spotted a small speck in the distance.

The speck turned into a line and quickly expanded. And soon it became a large avian silhouette that flew clear over them at about 30 meters above the ground. The noise crossed the air from the left to the right.

It was an aeroplane. Its wings shone in the light of dusk as it banked to the left.

The frame was painted in muted greens and browns. At the end of its pointed nose was a propeller. The cockpit stuck out like a birdcage. And though it was a 2-seater, the aeroplane was only carrying one person—the pilot.

It was a reverse gull wing craft with a wingspan of 14 meters. A gull wing was a type of wing that was curved like a boomerang, like the wings of a gull. In the case of a reverse gull wing craft, the wings were inverted.

Under the bends of the wings were cylindrical pods, from which protruded two pipes. The pipe and the inside of the pod was a modified 37mm anti-aircraft machine gun. The barrels were nearly 2 meters long.

The aeroplane slowly continued to bank left, eventually crossing the tracks ahead of the train.

<Listen up, Treize. I’m going to do something about that car with the bomb,> said a female voice.

“Hm?”

Weasel frowned.

“Allison!” Treize cheered. And—

“Huh? Is Mom on that plane?” Lillia asked from behind him. Treize nodded.

<I’ve been listening to the conversation for a while now. I’m going to separate the last car from the train.>

<Wait a moment, please. How?> Weasel asked over the radio.

<You’ll see. You aside, I can’t let those two die,> Allison replied pleasantly.

The aeroplane broke out of the swerve and approached the left side of the train. The nose and the guns were pointed at the cars.

<All of you, please duck. You have 20 seconds.>

Treize turned to Lillia.

“Allison’s going to do something. Duck.”

“What’s she going to do?”

“I don’t know. But let’s trust her.”

They crouched at the end of the dining car.

“I wonder what she’ll do?” Weasel mused, taking a seat at the opposite end of the car.

“All right.”

Allison lined up her crosshairs with the train, which was getting closer and closer to her craft. Her target: the coupling between the third and fourth cars. Because the train was moving to Allison’s left, she adjusted for the movement with pedal control.

Only a few dozen meters were left between the train and the aeroplane.

“There.”

Allison opened fire.

The machine guns under her wings roared twice.

Rings of light were launched from the barrels, and were followed by a deafening noise. First from the left, then the right.

The first shot hit the coupling mechanism and shattered the metal link in an instant.

The second shot landed on the base of the last car, near the front. It pierced through a wheel and exploded underneath, half-destroying three of the axles.

“Now why can’t I pull that off when I’m shooting by hand?”

With the pilot’s mumbling in its cage, the aeroplane crossed over the train—almost low enough for the landing gear to touch the roof.

The aeroplane responsible for the gunfire crossed Treize’s sights from right to left. A second later, the last car in the train began to disappear into the distance.

Just like the car Treize had driven to the train, the last car moved away at 30 kilometers an hour. The broken base skidded against the tracks, and sparks flew into the air.

<Ten seconds left. Keep your heads down.>

When Treize heard Allison’s instruction,

“Get down.”

He shielded the crouching Lillia and got down on the roof.

“Gah.” Lillia squawked when he lay over her.

Weasel also followed Allison’s instructions and got down on his stomach on the roof.

<Six...five...four...three...two...>

They could hear Allison’s countdown.

The separated, smoking second-class sleeper car was about 70 meters behind them.

<Zero.>

It exploded.

For a split second the car seemed to balloon from the center.

The front and back of the car rose into the air, but a second later each end twisted from the inside out and exploded. Fragments of glass glittered in the air like droplets of champagne.

There was almost no fire. A shockwave spread like a white dome around the impact, but the dome quickly dissipated. The impact rushed across the grass and finally crashed past the three people on the roof.

“Whoa!”

“Eek!”

“Ugh!”

Treize, Lillia, and Weasel all screamed as the noise and the impact passed over and around them.

“Incredible...”

The shockwave even reached the aeroplane, which had departed at full throttle immediately after opening fire. The frame rose upwards slightly and shook.

Treize sat up.

The car behind them was in pieces. All he could see were fragmented metal bits from the base. The plain was already littered with chunks of scrap metal.

“That was close. If that went off while it was still part of the train, we’d all have been finished,” Treize mumbled.

They could hear small impacts around them. Small, light pieces from the last car were flying at them and hitting the roof.

“I get it. *Move*,” Lillia grumbled from under him.

“Oh! Right. Sorry.” Treize said, quickly moving aside and letting Lillia go free.

<Splendid! That was fantastic!> Weasel cried, jumping to his feet and slapping his thigh in lieu of applause.

A piece of shrapnel hit him in the head, but Weasel paid it no mind as he began to walk.

“Still, I don’t feel like going out in such a bombastic blaze of glory.”

“Wait, Lillia,” Treize said.

He had noticed Weasel’s movements—he knew what Weasel was planning next.

“I’m gonna go over and do something about that guy,” he said, and began to walk across the roof.

“Be careful!” Lillia managed to yell. Instead of giving a reply, Treize lightly waved his hand.

Watching the two get closer,

“I can’t shoot him like this...”

Allison gave up on shooting down Weasel.

“It’s all on you now, Your Highness.”

\* \* \*

The middle of the roof of the dining car.

Weasel and Treize were standing a mere 3 meters apart.

Treize was making no attempt to hide his scornful glare.

Weasel was making no attempt to hide his excited gaze.

Lillia crossed over to the remaining second class sleeper car and moved back. She sat in the middle of the car and stared at Treize's back.

She could hear an engine roaring overhead.

"I'm glad you're finally here, though it's a shame you're still clothed."

That was the first thing Weasel said.

"I have no intention of letting you do anything to me," Treize replied, scowling.

"Then what?"

"I'm going to fight you—and win."

"Scary. But you know, I'm both obligated to and interested in killing you. So at least let me enjoy you until the inevitable."

Lillia could hear everything.

"Hey! Why're you after Treize? You still haven't told me!" she demanded from the second class sleeper car.

"Ah, right." Weasel nodded. "It's because Treize is an Ikstovan prince!" he cried nonchalantly.

"...Wait, what? Are you out of your mind?" Lillia croaked. "That's ridiculous! You're trying to kill someone because of a stupid misunderstanding! You're an idiot! How could *anybody* think that...that..."

Lillia trailed off.

Treize, who had turned, was looking at her with an expression both sad and sheepish.

"Treize? Tell him. We're listening. If you have something to say, say it," Lillia urged.

"Er...well..."

"Well? What?"

"I...er..."

"You what?"

"That is to say...umm..."

Treize could not find the words. But Weasel could.

"Miss! He is a prince! A prince of Ikstova! The son of Queen Francesca and Carr Benedict!" he declared, hands cupped around his mouth.

"Hold it! Queen Francesca only has one child, and that's Princess Meriel!" Lillia replied.

"There are complicated circumstances behind the family, Miss! An old rule in the royal family allows the monarch to have only one child! Though the rule is meaningless now that the Ikstova Pass is public knowledge, Prince Treize was born the twin brother of Princess Meriel and could not reveal his royal status!"

Lillia frowned.



“What the heck? That sounds like a story out of a cheap novel. Treize, are you gonna stand there and let this guy make up stuff...about...you...?”

There was, again, a troubled expression on Treize’s face.

“No way...is this for real?” Lillia said slowly.

Treize finally broke his silence.

“It is...”

He was acknowledging everything.

Lillia rose to her feet. Her long hair fell out of her jacket and tumbled in the wind.

Her hair aflutter, Lillia stood on her feet on the second class sleeper car and pointed an accusing finger at Treize. “Wait! You’d better not say something like, ‘I wasn’t trying to hide it from you’!”

Treize’s answer was loud and clear. And immediate.

“No! I was going to hide it forever!”

“Agh!” Lillia moaned, and added, “Then never mind!”

“Really?” “Really?”

Treize and Weasel replied in unison.

“Treize! I’ve got a boatload of things I wanna interrogate you about, but we can save that for later! Do something about that creep over there!”

“All right... Thanks, Lillia.”

Treize slowly turned. The last Lillia saw of his face was his profiled smile.

“Prince Treize,” Weasel said, “It’s very brave of you to risk your life coming all this way, although it’s a little predictable. Do you love her that much?”

It was an unexpected question. Treize thought for a moment before answering.

“My sister asked me the same question once before.”

“Oh? And how did you answer?”

Slowly, Treize held his right hand in a fist over his chest.

“I’ve been thinking. Ever since Mother told me about the engagement on my fifteenth birthday...”

“W-wait a second—”

Not even realizing that Lillia’s face behind him was red for a reason other than the sunset,

“I...”

Treize made up his mind to speak.

“I don’t know!”

“What?” “Huh?”

The two people around him furrowed their brows.

“I don’t know. I just don’t. We’ve been friends since we were little, and we had so much fun together. But if you asked me if I really liked her—*loved* her—if I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her...not because I was running away from an arranged marriage, but because I truly loved her with all my heart... I couldn’t say for sure. I’ve been thinking about this ever since I visited the Capital District. But I just don’t know. How do I feel? Is this really what it means to be in love?” Treize wondered, lost.

“...Now I’ve got even more to ask you...but that’s *after* I give you a good beating,” Lillia growled, teeth bared and hands balled into fists.

Weasel, on the other hand, was astounded.

“My Prince, you’re more dense than I thought.”

“I’m not your prince!” Treize cried. Weasel scolded him almost as though he were a reliable older brother giving him life advice.

“But it’s true! Why else would you risk life and limb for a girl you might not even love?! I prepared contingency plans in case you didn’t follow this train, you know. In case the girl was nothing special to you. But here you are! And with no regrets, you’re risking your life for her! Isn’t that what it means to be in love?!”

“I-is that how it works?” Treize wondered.

“Of course! There’s no need to brood about your emotions! Love means being honest to yourself! Convey your honest emotions, and the person responds with *their* honest emotions. That’s what romance is! When two hearts become one and give birth to bliss!” Weasel pontificated.

Treize could not say a word.

“That’s pretty good,” Lillia admitted. Weasel continued.

“And I love you, Prince Treize! I am madly in love with you! From the bottom of my heart! So come to me! And die in my arms!”

“I refuse!” This time, Treize answered immediately. He clenched his fists, pulled back his right foot, and took a low stance.

“So you’re going to play hard-to-get.” Weasel also swung his arms, holding his hands in fists at eye-level and taking a fighting stance.

“I’ll knock you off this train!” Treize threatened.

“I’ll love you to the end!” Weasel replied.

Treize took a step forward.

Weasel stayed put. He scrutinized Treize’s eyes with a strangely peaceful gaze.

Treize met his look with a glare and took a slow half-step forward.

“Beautiful...” Weasel muttered, entranced.

“Hah!” Treize lunged. He swung his right fist at Weasel’s chin, as Weasel was taller.

“Not bad!” Weasel grinned. He narrowly but languidly avoided the attack.

Treize swung with his left for a consecutive attack—

“Ah!”

But he noticed Weasel duck, and quickly leapt back.

Weasel’s left leg narrowly cut across where Treize had been trying to go.

“That was close.”

Weasel spun from below Treize, who had leapt back, and attempted a roundhouse kick with his right leg.

Treize leapt back again. This time, as far as he could. Weasel’s kick passed right under where Treize’s feet had been a moment ago.

“He’s really good...”



Treize ended up making no progress, instead being forced backwards. Weasel slowly stood up.

“You’re not bad at all, Prince Treize. And I was so ready to love you to death... It’s been a long time since I had the chance to lay eyes on a cute boy like you,” Weasel said sadly. Treize shuddered.

“Whoa... I’d rather you kill me quickly.”

Weasel beamed. “Then leave it to me! Now is the time!”

“Not now!”

“Such a tease.”

At that moment, something flew violently at Treize.

“Huh?”

Treize was caught off-guard. The object struck him square in the chest.

There was a dull thud.

“Grk!”

Treize gasped as he fell to his knees, curling forward.

What struck him—and was now falling off the side of the train—was the radio Weasel had been wearing around his waist.

“Treize!”

Lillia, who had no idea what had happened, called his name. There was no response.

“Oh. I suppose your ribs must be fractured now. Or maybe even broken. It must be painful,” Weasel said sympathetically.

“Damn it...bastard...”

Looking down at Treize, who raised his head, Weasel put on a look of utter ecstasy.

“Aah...even when you’re angry, you’re beautiful...”

“Ha!”

With a cry, Treize lobbed his own radio.

The radio flew about 3 meters before hitting and bouncing off Weasel’s foot. He had quickly and effortlessly kicked it aside. The radio fell into the mud on the plains.

“Damn it...” Treize grimaced.

Weasel lowered his foot, and for seemingly no reason, cast off his jacket. It flew off in the wind.

He undid his necktie. Then he violently tore off his shirt, buttons and all. Then came his undershirt, which he slowly pulled off over his head.

As Treize and Lillia watched in silence, Weasel revealed his upper body.

Though he was slender in build, he had the musculature of a trained gymnast—not a single ounce of fat to be seen.

“I had so much time on my hands in prison. And I also had to deal with brutes who thought they could kill me for fame. So I found myself spending quite a lot of time training,” Weasel explained, though no one had asked.

Then, he clasped his hands over his chest, as though in solemn prayer.

“Now, my prince. Leave your body to me, if only in your final moments. I shall be a gentle cushion and hold you with love. Let me take you on a final journey to the wonderful world of death.”

“I refuse! —Ow...”

Treize had called out reflexively, but he clutched at his chest in pain. He lost his balance.

“Eek!”

Lillia screamed softly. Treize managed to avoid falling, grasping the rooftop with his left hand.

“You can’t fight me in that state. You don’t even have a weapon. Now...let us love.”

“Damn it...”

Treize plunked down on the roof. He clutched his stomach with his hands.

“Is this really it? ...Is there nothing else I can do?” he wondered weakly.

“Wha— No! Don’t give up, Treize!” Lillia cried. But Treize did not respond.

“Ah! So you finally see reason!” Weasel smiled. He spread his arms wide and approached to embrace Treize. “Not to worry! As long as you do everything I say, the young lady will be unharmed! Now, come and be one with me! I promise, it’ll feel very good!”

“I’m sorry, Mother... I have no other choice...” Treize muttered, hanging his head.

“Ah. I understand you must be scared. But don’t worry, I’ll be gentle.”

Weasel’s smile was hanging right over him.

“Now...come here.”

Like a knight greeting a king, Weasel knelt before Treize.

Treize raised his head.

His eyes were clearly visible between his bangs.

“Hm...?”

At that moment, Weasel realized—they were not the eyes of a defeated dove, but the sharpened gaze of a hawk.

“I refuse,” Treize said. “Take this!”

Sitting upright, Treize swung his right arm at Weasel’s face. As though drawing a sword, he moved his right hand from his left side to the upper right.

“Ah.”

Weasel stepped back, quickly getting out of punching range.

There was a heavy, metallic thud.

“Agh—”

Weasel let out a cry.

The edge of Treize’s belt pack had struck his right temple.

Inside was the camera Treize had received as a gift from the queen. It was a piece of metal weighing several hundred grams.

Treize’s right hand was clutching the belt end of the pack.

The belt pack dropped from the side of Weasel’s head. Blood began flowing from the torn skin.

Treize, sitting on one knee with the makeshift sword in his grip, muttered quietly,

“I’m sorry, Mother... I think I probably broke it.”

“Ugh... Ahh...”

Scattering blood over his chiseled body and the roof of the train, Weasel moaned.

And the moment he fell to his knees—

“Don’t blame me too much!” Treize cried, lashing out again. He rose to his feet and swung his belt pack again from right to left.

This time, the camera struck Weasel on the left temple. There was another heavy thud.

Weasel staggered and fell forward on the roof. Blood from his head flowed down the car lit red by the sunset.

Treize pulled away the belt pack to strike Weasel in the back. And he swung again—

“Ahh...”

Weasel groaned. Treize froze.

“Yes...yes...more... Everyone...they all died and left me behind... I’m sick of being left behind...”

Treize wasted no time in retorting,

“Because you *killed* them all!”

Weasel—bleeding from both sides of the head—looked up at him. “I suppose...you could say that... But it really is painful... You understand, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t!” Treize replied, making to strike—

“Hah!”

Scattering blood in his wake, Weasel lunged.

“Whoa!” The belt pack fell out of Treize’s grip. Treize and Weasel slid across the roof, skidding all the way to the edge of the dining car. And they fell between the cars.

“Treize!” Lillia rushed over to the coupling.

“Damn it...”

There she found Treize, holding on to the railings for dear life.

“Ahaha!”

And there was Weasel, his face covered in blood and his arms clinging to Treize’s legs. His body was dangling in the air.

“Hahahaha! I’ve killed so many people, and I’ve watched them die with my own eyes—but now that I think about it, this is the first time that *I’ll* be dying! This is going to be interesting!”

Treize tried to pull his legs away. But Weasel was too strong. He would not let go.

“Urgh... You sick bastard! I’ll be glad to watch, so go die by yourself!”

“Let’s not be so cruel! We’ve come this far; we may as well die together, my beloved prince!”

“I’m not your prince!”

Lillia leapt over the coupling and landed on the roof of the dining car. She crouched at the edge and held out a hand to Treize.

“Treize! Grab my hand!”

“No, Lillia! You’re going to fall too! Get back!” Treize replied without a moment’s hesitation.

And behind him—

“Let’s go...together...together...”

The man covered in blood mumbled under his breath.

Treize looked up.

When his eyes met Lillia's, he smiled.

"Huh?"

"Sorry, Lillia. We can talk later."

Then, Treize turned to the man clinging to his legs.

"Hey! You said before that I could leave my body to you, right?"

"I did!" Weasel cried in ecstasy.

"And you meant it, right?"

"Of course!"

Then—

"Then I'm counting on you!"

Treize let go.

"Ah—"

As Lillia watched, Treize and Weasel disappeared into the shadow of the train.

Their figures tangled in midair and fell into the shadow, almost impossible to distinguish from the ground. They fell in the mud of the plains and quickly grew distant.

"TREIZE!" Lillia cried, rushing back to the other car.

She sprinted at full speed along the roof, quickly reaching the end of the last car. Lillia crouched at the edge and let her gaze fall to the tracks.

"No..."

All she could see were the lonely plains and the rails the train had traveled along.

## **Chapter 10: Lillia and Treize**

### **The 2nd day of the fourth month of the year 3306 of the World Calendar.**

The first day of the new term arrived. Lillia was at school.

It was time for first period. She sat at a desk in a classroom with about 20 other students.

“It’s been a while, everyone. I see you’re all doing well. I’m already excited to start this new term; it feels like the perfect time to try something new.”

The middle-aged teacher was rambling at length.

Lillia was not listening.

With her eyes narrowed, she looked up at the overcast sky.

There was a gentle breeze in the air, and the clouds moved at a crawl.

On that day—

When Allison—who was circling the air overhead—saw the two figures fall and her daughter waving desperately from the roof of the last car, she flew into a descent.

She tried to communicate via radio, but there was no response. So she opened fire on the still-running locomotive. This was what she had brought the aeroplane for in the first place.

Allison continued to attack the sturdy diesel engine until it was finally destroyed. By the time the train was released from inertia, they were quite far from where the two had fallen.

“Mom! Treize fell off the train! We have to go find him!”

“I know, honey. Calm down. I hate to say it, but finding him’s beyond me right now.”

Lillia clung desperately to her mother, who had landed on the plains. But darkness had already fallen upon them and the stars were all they had to see by.

Allison sat Lillia in the back seat of the fighter plane. The back seat was the gunner’s seat, which faced the back of the plane. Allison returned to the cockpit and communicated over the radio with someone. Then—

“Some of the airmen are going to come by car to search the area. Let’s go back for now, sweetheart.”

Lillia nodded. Allison started the engines and taxied over the plains to take off.

In the darkened sky,

<Mom...did you know?> Lillia asked over the internal line.

Allison, who sat back-to-back with her daughter, answered.

<I did. I’ve known Queen Francesca since before she was crowned. But I didn’t want to say anything until Treize did.>

<...I see. I still have a lot of questions, but I’ll wait until I can ask Treize.>

<Yes. Let’s do that, sweetheart.>

After the short conversation, silence fell over them.

The aeroplane landed at a brightly-lit airstrip.

In the same airspace was an aeroplane that had just taken off, but it was not visible to Lillia.

The aeroplane carrying Major Travas, his subordinates, and Princess Matilda of Bezel flew north, towards the port where the Bezelese battleship was stationed.

The teacher continued speaking to the class.

“Now, let’s go over a few housekeeping issues. They’ve started a large-scale renovation project at the apartment complex east of the campus. We’ll be seeing a lot of heavy machinery in the area for some time. Take care when you’re passing through—”

Lillia gazed blankly out the window.

Several days earlier—

Lillia was back home in the Capital District when she received a phone call saying that the body of the man called Weasel—once known as Prisoner 42—had been found. The call was from a Confederation Air Force officer who was a subordinate of Allison’s. Allison happened to be away from home for days on end for work.

<What about Treize? They didn’t find anyone else?!> Lillia asked.

<The Air Force didn’t find anyone else. But—>

<But?>

<We didn’t find any other bodies on the scene,> the officer said indifferently, and hung up with a word of goodbye.

“As you all know, tomorrow is the last day to register with a date for the spring dance party. I’m sure you all kept in touch by telephone and mail over the break, but—”

As smiles and sighs filled the classroom, Lillia continued to gaze blankly out the window. Meg, who was taking the same class, was looking at her worriedly.

Earlier that morning—

“What’s wrong, Lillia? You look down.”

“Meg... It’s just... Treize from Iks is missing right now...”

“Missing? How?”

“A lot of things happened...and we’re waiting for them to finish investigating. Heh.”

“My goodness...”

Meg cast Lillia a concerned look.

At the same time—

The moon in the eastern sky lit up Sfrestus, the capital of Sou Be-II.

The luxurious parlor overlooked a garden cloaked in pale blue light. A man in his early sixties stepped inside.

He was dressed in a brown Royal Army uniform, with a badge of rank indicating that he was a major general. Embroidered on the name tag on his breast was the name 'Aikashia'.

Greeting him was a man in a nightgown, who was holding a glass of wine. He was the man who had hired Prisoner 42.

The man said arrogantly that he did not normally allow visitors at this time of night.

"My sincerest apologies, Your Grace. I have important news that calls for your immediate attention," the bespectacled major general said.

The owner of the parlor demanded an explanation.

"Yes, Your Grace. The intelligence department acquired an unfortunate piece of information. We thought it would be best to report as quickly as possible."

The owner of the parlor waved off the preamble and ordered the soldier to get to the point.

"Yes, sir. We've received reports that Prisoner 42, who escaped from prison last month, was sighted in Roxche. It sounds unbelievable, but we've confirmed the information. He is wanted by the Eastern police after a string of murders in Western Roxche."

What of it, asked the owner of the parlor. It was delightful to hear that the monster had left their homeland, he said with a sip of his wine.

Now they could leave the work to the Roxchean police, he said. Princess Matilda had returned safely and international relations had improved—perhaps they should, in that same spirit, have some faith in the East, the man said, pouring more wine into his glass.

"It grieves me to say, Your Grace, that we've received an update on the situation. My subordinates inform me that Prisoner 42 has crossed the Lutoni again and returned to Sfrestus."

The wine spilled. Loudly.

"We aren't sure why he took the trouble of crossing the Lutoni again. But we know that he is a stubborn and obsessive man. We fear the possibility that he might go after you and your son, Your Grace, as you were the one who 'sentenced him to imprisonment'. For the time being \_\_\_"

"He won't be getting much sleep for the time being," Major General Aikashia said as he stepped into a black car.

"That's good to hear. Gave us a lot of trouble, that one." The driver, a man in a military uniform, chuckled. He was the young man who was called 'Yzma' during the mission in Roxche. He started the car and chattered as he always did. "Now that the royal family knows what really went on, the duke's son will never marry the princess. And now a certain someone can officially make an appearance."

"Of course."

"Apparently he twisted in midair and used the bastard's body to break his fall. Not bad at all. I was impressed, actually. He really can get things done if he puts his mind to it."

"Indeed. —By the way, Young Master Bernstein."

“Hm? Yes, Headmaster? Do you have a new mission for me? I’m ready anytime!” Yzma—the future head of House Berstein—cheered, putting his hands on the steering wheel.

“Excellent. His Majesty the King was quite impressed by your performance in this last mission. He requests that you come to work for the royal family.”

“What? Paper-pushing at the capital? You can’t do this to me, Headmaster! You’ve got to save me! What did I do to deserve this?”

“So many things.”



“That’s all for housekeeping.”

Lillia gazed blankly out the window.

“Now, I’d like to introduce a transfer student who’ll be starting at our school this term.”

The teacher opened the door and someone stepped inside—

The other students—especially the girls—began whispering excitedly—

But Lillia continued gazing blankly out the window.

“He came all the way to the Capital District to attend school here. He moved in yesterday, so I’m sure dormitory students have met him already. We’ll be doing introductions since this will be his first class at our school.”

Lillia gazed blankly out the window. The breeze had nearly stopped. The clouds, as well.

“If you’ll introduce yourself to the class.”

Lillia gazed blankly out the window.

“Er...my name is Treize. Treize Bain.”

Lillia turned.

She stared at Treize, who was wearing a school uniform.

Lillia practically leapt to her feet, pushing aside her chair and rushing to the front like a gust of wind. Her eyes were full of tears.

“Hey, Lillia. It’s been—”

She threw a punch at the prince of Ikstova.

At the same time—

“Hmm...it’s like my paperwork is multiplying.”

Allison Whittington Schultz was battling a mound of documents at her messy desk in an Air Force base outside the Capital District.

“Sorry you have to do all that work, Captain Schultz. But I suppose you’ve got to pay off the long vacation, the unauthorized use of a fighter plane, and the costs of the search party somehow,” her superior joked, but Allison ignored the jab.

“I wonder if they’ve met by now?” she wondered.



Meanwhile, Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz—

“Gah!”

—Grabbed Treize by the collar as he hit the chalkboard behind him and bounced forward.

“Ow—ow—ow—my ribs aren’t—that hurts Lillia please stop shaking me—”

“Shut up!”

As the teacher and all the students besides Meg watched in shock,

“You’ve got a lot of explaining to do!” Lillia demanded loudly, ferocious as an angry  
beast.

“I-I’ve got a lot of things to *say*, too...” Treize stammered, caught helplessly in her grip.

Strauski Megmica stood with a smile on her face and began applauding loudly.

“Yes! Go get him, Lillia! Dance!”

The male student sitting next to her flinched in surprise.

As she had spoken in Bezelese, only three people in the classroom had understood.



At the same time—

“Is this all right, Sister?”

“Yes, Carla. You’re a very quick learner, I see.”

“It’s Carlo!”

“Oh, right. I’m sorry, Carlo.”

“Please don’t forget.”

Her slightly long red hair fluttering, Carlo pouted.

Under a clear blue sky was a glittering blue lake, next to which was a grassy field. On the benches and tables set up there were about 20 children from the Ein Morseau Children’s Home, practicing their handwriting in their new notebooks.

Carlo urged the nun who was teaching them for more words.

“C’mon, teach me how to write ‘numbskull’! ‘Wimp’ is fine too. And teach me how to write ‘top secret’.”

The nun blinked.

“...Maybe we should start off with some nicer words.”

Carlo tightened her grip on her pencil.

“C’mon, I want to write to someone!”

“Oh my. To whom?” the nun asked with a smile. Carlo put on an annoyed look.

“To a numbskull prince and a princess with long, pretty hair. So teach me!”

At the same time—

Gratz Axentine was at her hometown in the Kingdom of Iltoa. She lay in her own bed in her own room for the first time in years, looking up at a familiar ceiling.

She pulled her right hand out of the blankets and grabbed a picture frame from her nightstand. She brought it to her face.

Under the pale blue light from the window, a Royal Army captain and a young girl smiled together in the photograph.

Written on the photo in the captain's handwriting were the words,

'True to your mission to the very end.'

"Yes. It's finished..."

The woman clutched the frame to her chest and slowly closed her eyes.

"Good night, Father."

At the same time—

“Cheers!”

“Mm.”

“...Cheers.”

The men who were once called Uno, Ozette, and Ed were in their office in the Sou Be-Il embassy in Roxche’s Capital District. Though it was only morning, they were drinking in their former workplace.

The men, who were all in suits, had spread newspaper over the floor and were using a cardboard box full of documents as a makeshift table for their little party.

The office had been cleaned out completely. There were no more chairs or tables. Only a few lonely cardboard boxes were scattered about.

In the next room over was nothing but their superior’s old desk.

The men muttered between sips from their mugs.

“It’s gonna get pretty lonely now.”

“Hm.”

“Well, it’s not like this is the last we’ll see of each other.”

The men reminisced nostalgically.

“And it looks like we’ll be saying goodbye to these babies for a while.”

Munching on the Capital District’s famous crisps, the men clinked glasses.

At the same time—

Near the Lutoni River, at the edge of a forest, was a village.

It was a small settlement with only about 20 newly-built houses. At the village entrance was a sign that read, 'Future Village'.

A light fog was upon the area, and dawn was beginning to glow beyond the eastern horizon.

Near the center of the village was a home that looked older than the others. In the middle of the old wooden house was a red brick chimney.

Four maids were working near the house. They were cleaning the yard and drawing water with expert hands.

Among them was an elderly woman. She had white hair and a wrinkled face. She seemed to be over 70 years of age, but she stood tall as she moved about vigorously, issuing orders to the servants.

A small truck approached the house.

The truck pulled over in front of the yard. A man disembarked. He greeted everyone as he unloaded bottles of milk from the back.

"Good morning. Thank you for the milk, as always," the old woman said to him.

"Good morning, Chief. I see you're as healthy as ever. —Ah, I have a letter for you today. It's from your son."

"Oh my."

The woman received the postcard with a smile and sent off the truck. Then she looked down at the postcard.

'Dearest Mother,

'How are you? I'm doing very well.

'I've just finished an important mission and am probably going to receive a long vacation.

'I'll send you a telegram soon. I'd like to see you at the village—I have something important to discuss. I'd like my potatoes sliced and stir-fried, please.

'Your loving son.'

Travas Ladia smiled.

"Of course."

She raised her right hand in a salute.



At the same time—

“Which is why I’m saying we have to attract tourists during the winter, too! And downhill skiing is the key! Downhill skiing! It’s all about cross-country skiing down in the plains, but we have to advertise the fact that you can enjoy downhill skiing in Iks with the help of chairlifts!”

In the Kingdom of Iks, which was still covered in snow, the princess passionately lectured her family over breakfast.

“Hm. That might not be such a bad idea,” said her father—still sporting a full beard—as he took a sip of tea mixed with jam.

“Maybe we should save the governing for after breakfast, Meriel?” said her mother—the Queen of Ikstova—as she spread melted cheese on a piece of toast.

“No! The sooner we plan, the better! Luckily, there’s still a gentle slope left next to Pamil Village. We’ll compensate the citizens who’re using the land for grazing and have them clear the area. Then we can build an affordable hotel on the lakeshore and start a ski resort! We’ll have to build a small rail system between the hill and Kunst. We can hire the same manufacturers who’ll be working on the chairlifts! They’ll give us a discount for the second job. The problem is the visitors who’ll want to come by aeroplane when the lake isn’t available. We’ll have to consider building an airport in the pass, too!” Meriel raved, slamming her fists on the table.

“Mm. This tea is great. Just the right amount of jam,” Benedict commented. Fiona held out a piece of toast for him.

“Here you are.”

“Ah, thank you, Fi. I’m afraid this is the only way I can repay you…” Benedict trailed off, kissing her. The kiss lasted quite some time.

“Both of you! I’m discussing the country’s future here!”

The princess’s voice resounded through the kingdom of silver and white.

Several days had passed since the new term began.

On the school grounds, Lillia took out a photograph from her pocket.

“Check this out, Meg.”

“What is it, Lillia? A photo?”

“I met this person on the train a few weeks ago. Apparently she’s an heiress from Sou Be-  
II. We ended up chatting for a long time and became friends. So we took a picture together.”

“Wow! Can I see?”

Strauski Megmica looked at the photograph—and three seconds later, lost consciousness.

“Eek! Meg, wake up!”

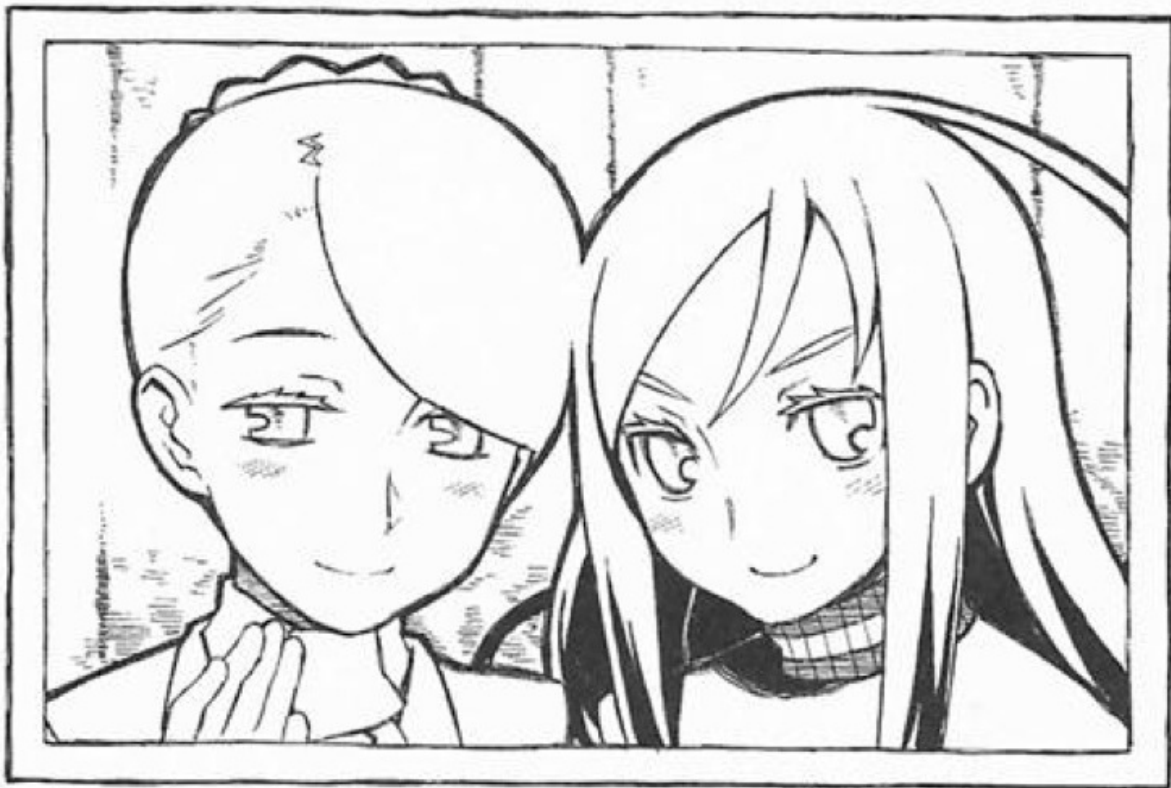
A thin layer of clouds floated across the sky. Buildings covered the flat land below.

High-rise condos stood in the distance in the Capital District. Laundry fluttered on the  
roofs of some of the buildings.

The winds from the west came to a stop—

And spring was upon the land in full force.

**-My Prince: End-**



## **Chronicling the Prince**

**The year 3289 of the World Calendar. A certain day, the beginning of the year.**

Today is a blessed day.

I find myself dusting off my pen and paper today to write, in spite of my lack of talent.

I wish to leave a record—humble as it may be—for those who will live here in the future, and for the village. This journal is a record concerning the kingdom's prince and princess.

A short time ago, Queen Francesca—Lady Fiona, or just Fi (this is quite complicated, so I will refer to her as Fi)\*

\*Fi is the younger twin sister of Princess Francesca. She was raised in this village as a normal girl, apart from the royal family. Years after the terrorist attack that left the rest of the royal family dead, Fi discovered the culprit and revealed herself before the people as Princess Francesca, so as to bring the criminal's actions to light. Very few people know this truth. Although I personally do not believe it will matter if we revealed it to the public now.

A short time ago, Fi gave birth to twins.

A sweet baby boy and a feisty baby girl.

Mother and children are all healthy and well. The entire village is in a festive mood.

But to think twins would be born into the royal family again... The rule that made Fi who she was—the mysterious rule in the family that permits the monarch to have only one child—remains. One of the twins will be officially announced as the heir to the throne, and the other will be raised in the village as Fi had been.

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Their names are decided. Fi, who had realized that she was carrying twins, had consulted with Sir Benedict and come up with two names.

The girl is named Meriel.

Fi did not tell us the reason behind her name. Perhaps she had something meaningful in mind. In any case, no one was opposed to such a lovely name.

The boy is named Treize.

Everyone understood this choice instantly. We were moved.

The doctor whom Fi had called ‘Grandfather’, a physician named Treze Bain.

He was once a doctor here in this village. He was the one who had been charged with raising Fi. He had rescued Princess Francesca from the flames and done everything in his power to try and save her from her wounds.

Fi explained that the boy’s name was Treize—with an ‘i’—to make it easier to pronounce in Bezelese, the official language of Sou Be-II.

It is a wonderful name.

I pray we will be able to watch them grow as long as we can.

**Spring. A certain day, a certain month.**

The proclamation has been made.

Fi announced Princess Meriel to the public. Ikstova's next ruler will be a queen as well.

Prince Treize does not officially exist. Though his birth was registered, he will have both royal and commoner status.

I was also informed that Roxche's president and the King of Bezel have been informed about his existence.

**Summer. A certain day, a certain month.**

It has been a long time since Fi left Kunst and came to the village. We had a chance to see the princess and prince as well.

Princess Meriel cries loudly enough to shake the floorboards. Prince Treize is impeccably quiet. They could not be any more different.

Princess Meriel received the edelweiss crest, and Prince Treize the hawk.

The golden pendants, proof of their royal lineage, shone on their breasts. Everyone panicked when Princess Meriel tried to eat her pendant.

**The Year 3290 of the World Calendar.**

**Spring.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Construction on the new palace and the villa have finally finished, and the queen's family has moved out of the village.

But Fi has decided to keep her children at her side for the time being.

She says that she will have Treize live in the village later. She also plans to have the royal family live in the village as much as their public duties allow.

The prince and the princess learned to walk at almost the same time. Sir Benedict could scarcely hide his excitement. Some of the village women moved to the royal palace and the villa to serve the family.

**The year 3291 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Princess Meriel and Prince Treize turned two today. Time seems to pass in the blink of an eye.

They can now both say simple words. Fi and Sir Benedict are doing their best to speak to them in both Roxchean and Bezelese.

Fi has begun to stay more at the palace for her duties. But the prince and princess do not seem to mind, as the entire village adores them. Even now, they are giggling and waddling about the room.



**The year 3292 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

On their third birthday, Princess Meriel and Prince Treize had a big argument.

When I heard that they were playing in the village hall, I went to see them. And there I found the little ones swinging their tiny fists at each other. It ended with Princess Meriel's overwhelming victory.

Prince Treize was wailing, and Princess Meriel was sitting atop him proudly, a trickle of blood running from her nose.

The cause of the fight, it seemed, was about who was the older of the twins.

Fi did not say, so I could not answer. But the prince and princess seemed dissatisfied with my response. I hope they won't squabble over this issue for years to come.

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize is bedridden with a cold.

We had Princess Meriel sleep in another room so she would not catch his cold, but she insisted on personally nursing him to health. In the end, both of the twins were left sick.

**Autumn.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

The puppy at Benny's house was spooked by lightning and ran into the house—and, of all times, when Sir Benedict was asleep.

Princess Meriel and Prince Treize ran circles around their room trying to escape. In the end, Princess Meriel struck the puppy on the nose to drive it off.

Thankfully, they were not hurt. But Prince Treize cried in terror all day long until Fi returned in the evening.

Everyone is worried that Prince Treize might become even more withdrawn than he already is.

**The year 3293 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Princess Meriel and Prince Treize had their first argument in a very long time.

Like before, they fought over who was the older sibling and ended up getting into a fistfight in front of Sir Benedict.

Prince Treize, who suffered a clean defeat, escaped to my house and asked me to teach him how to use a gun.

I told him to train by shoveling snow so he could lift something as heavy as a gun. Innocently enough, he did exactly what he was told with enthusiasm.

I don't approve of his wanting to win with strength, but Prince Treize does need to someday learn to fight in order to protect the kingdom and the people. He must become strong. I plan to use this opportunity to slowly train him.

Still, no amount of training will help him triumph over Princess Meriel.

**Spring.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Fi took Princess Meriel to the palace in Kunst to begin teaching her about the work of a queen.

Even Sir Benedict is away from the village at times now. But Prince Treize bravely told me,

“I’m not lonely! Because everyone else is here!”

Perhaps he was lying, then. The entire village fell in love with the unrecognized prince all over again.

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Ms. Allison Schultz from the Capital District visited the village with her three-year-old daughter, Miss Lillianne.

I don't know the details, but apparently Ms. Schultz and her daughter visited Kunst once, when Miss Lillianne was still an infant. I was told that a photograph Fi had taken at the time still hangs in her office at the palace.

Ms. Schultz and her husband Wilhelm Schultz are heroes who saved this country several years ago. It pains me that we cannot publicize their incredible actions.

Ms. Schultz told me that this year, she finally achieved her dream of becoming a test pilot with the Confederation Air Force.

Miss Lillianne, born a year after the prince, is a sweet girl with brown hair. She is incredibly clever and energetic.

Miss Lillianne met Prince Treize at the village and played with him.

There are no other children in the village. This was the first time Prince Treize played with someone of his own age, other than his sister.

I was worried at first that the quiet, introverted Prince Treize might end up running away.

But the prince seemed to get over his reservations. Miss Lillianne led him outside and they played together. In the afternoon, they were both tired out from their games and fell asleep together under a tree.

The villagers gathered to have a look at the precious sight. Sir Benedict took a photograph. He says he will show it to Fi later.

We instructed Prince Treize to not tell Miss Lillianne about his true heritage.

We worried that, in his youthful recklessness, he might tell her anyway. But Prince Treize was true to his word.

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Today, Miss Lillianne and Ms. Schultz left for the Capital District.

Prince Treize was teary-eyed by the time they said their goodbyes. He must have been sad to see her go, after they had become such close friends. He began crying when the bus finally left.

The entire village stepped in to bring a smile back to his face, but no amount of coaxing—in Roxchean or Bezelese—would stop his tears. The prince cried himself to sleep.



**The year 3294 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

The day Prince Treize and Princess Meriel turned five, my wife passed away.

She was more than I could have ever asked for—not once since we moved to this valley did she utter a word of complaint.

Though Prince Treize and Princess Meriel should have had a wonderful day of celebration, they wept for my wife instead.



**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize is finally strong enough to hold up a small handgun.

I taught him how to use it, taking extra precautions for safety's sake.

The prince is quite talented—perhaps it's his quiet and withdrawn nature. I can't wait to see how much I can teach him before I pass away.

**Autumn.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Ms. Allison Schultz and Miss Lillianne visited Kunst.

They were only visiting for a day, as Ms. Schultz was there on business. But when Prince Treize returned to the village, he told me that he had a wonderful time with Miss Lillianne in Kunst.

He happily told me that, unlike Princess Meriel, even if Miss Lillianne got angry, in the end she became kind again.

“I’m gonna grow up to be a cool guy so she can protect me!”

I thought he might have something confused, but I did not correct him.

**The year 3295 of the World Calendar.**

**Spring.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

After discussing the matter with Sir Benedict, we decided to teach Prince Treize hand-to-hand combat.

Prince Treize would stay at the home of a member of the royal guard in Kunst, and take lessons at the police station. I considered that this might be too difficult for him—he is only six, after all—but Prince Treize was thrilled.

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize returned to the village after his training, covered in bruises.

“That was fun! I wanna go again!” he said. It warmed my heart to see him so confident.

But—

“Your face looks stupid!”

When Princess Meriel made fun of his bruises, Prince Treize burst into tears.

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Ms. Schultz and Miss Lillianne came to visit over the summer holidays.

Prince Treize was delighted to see Miss Lillianne again. They played together and lost their way in the woods.

It seems they assumed that they had gotten lost, and walked around in circles in the forest.

The other villagers weren't worried—Prince Treize and Miss Lillianne were just by the mushroom farm, and their voices were clearly audible all the while.

When the villagers went to get them in the evening, they were both asleep, exhausted.

I asked Prince Treize what happened.

He explained that Miss Lillianne had stubbornly led him around, taking them both in circles.

“Next time, if I think I’m right, I’m going to say so loudly.”

It seems the prince has learned a lesson.

**The year 3296 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize and Princess Meriel turned seven today.

Rather than attend school, they began private studies at the village and at the palace respectively. Prince Treize was quicker to learn to read, but Princess Meriel was faster at maths and sciences.

Prince Treize also asked to learn Ikstovan, a dying language. The oldest of the villagers are teaching him now, but I wonder if he could learn such a complicated language. I have my doubts.

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Sir Benedict has begun to give Prince Treize flying lessons.

At first, he says, he sat the prince in his lap and taught him the basics. Prince Treize was moved when he got to move the aeroplane on his own for the first time.

Meanwhile, Princess Meriel's interest was piqued by the roaring engines. She proudly declared that the mechanic taught her to unscrew bolts.

I cannot say I know how the prince and princess will mature.

So I pray with all my heart that I will live to see them grow as much as possible.

**The year 3297 of the World Calendar.**

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Miss Lillianne and Ms. Schultz came to visit.

Miss Lillianne is seven years old now and attending primary school in the Capital District. So she naturally asked Prince Treize about his school life.

When Prince Treize replied that he was being homeschooled by the villagers, Miss Lillianne decided that she wanted to be homeschooled as well.

Prince Treize seemed to feel responsible. He did everything he could to explain how wonderful it was that she was able to attend school, but Miss Lillianne would have none of it.

That was when Ms. Schultz stepped in.

“But Lillia, if you were homeschooled, you wouldn’t be able to eat school lunches. Wouldn’t you miss eating carrots?”

Miss Lillianne was convinced.

“I’m still no good...”

That evening, Prince Treize was still downcast.



**Autumn.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

I began to officially teach the eight-year-old prince how to hunt and use a rifle.

I was around his age when my uncle taught me to use a gun. I began by teaching Prince Treize how to shoot a small-caliber rifle. Today, I had him shoot a chicken tethered to a post.

We thanked the dead chicken and ate it together.

“People can’t survive unless they kill and eat other living things,” Prince Treize muttered gravely before emptying his plate.

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize asked to spend the night alone in a snow shelter. He must have heard somewhere about bivouac camping in the snowy mountains.

No one could change his mind. So we compromised and asked him to use the mound of snow by the village hall so that we could keep an eye on him. The prince would dig a hole in the snow and poke holes in the wall for air, and sleep with a blanket rolled up around him.

We watched him all night long, assuming that he would give up. But Prince Treize triumphed over the loneliness and the cold and enjoyed his breakfast the next morning.

He later told me that he had made a bet with Princess Meriel over this matter.

“I won!”

Everyone smiled when they saw the grin on his face.

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Two days after the bivouac attempt, Prince Treize became bedridden with a high fever. This time, we had to watch him all night long to nurse him back to health.

**The year 3298 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize and Princess Meriel turned nine today.

They were in such fierce competition with each other that the entire village was astounded by their academic prowess.

Prince Treize is not only fluent in Roxchean and Bezelese, he is also proficient at Ikstovan. It is truly remarkable.

Princess Meriel stated that her dream was to work with machinery, and asked for a toolkit for her birthday.

They still argue over who the older twin is, but they no longer resort to fistfights. On that note, Princess Meriel never loses an argument.

**Spring.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Sir Benedict proudly declared that Prince Treize managed both a takeoff and landing on his own.

Naturally, Sir Benedict was in the instructor's seat—but it is still quite a feat for a nine-year-old boy.

For some reason, Princess Meriel shows no interest in flying. But she commented that she wanted to take apart a large aeroplane engine. Sir Benedict had no choice but to give her a small engine from an old generator.

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Miss Lillianne and Ms. Schultz came to visit. Miss Lillianne had a wonderful time with Prince Treize and left for the Capital District today.

Miss Lillianne was growing out her hair. When Prince Treize commented that he liked it, Princess Meriel raised her voice.

“Then I’m gonna grow out my hair too!”

**The year 3299 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

I fell ill and almost lost my life.

I was fortunate enough to survive, but I caused Prince Treize much worry.

“Don’t die, Grandfather. You need to teach me a lot more about marksmanship.”

When the prince told me this, looking me in the eye, I was so overjoyed that I could have died a happy man then and there. But I suppose that can wait.

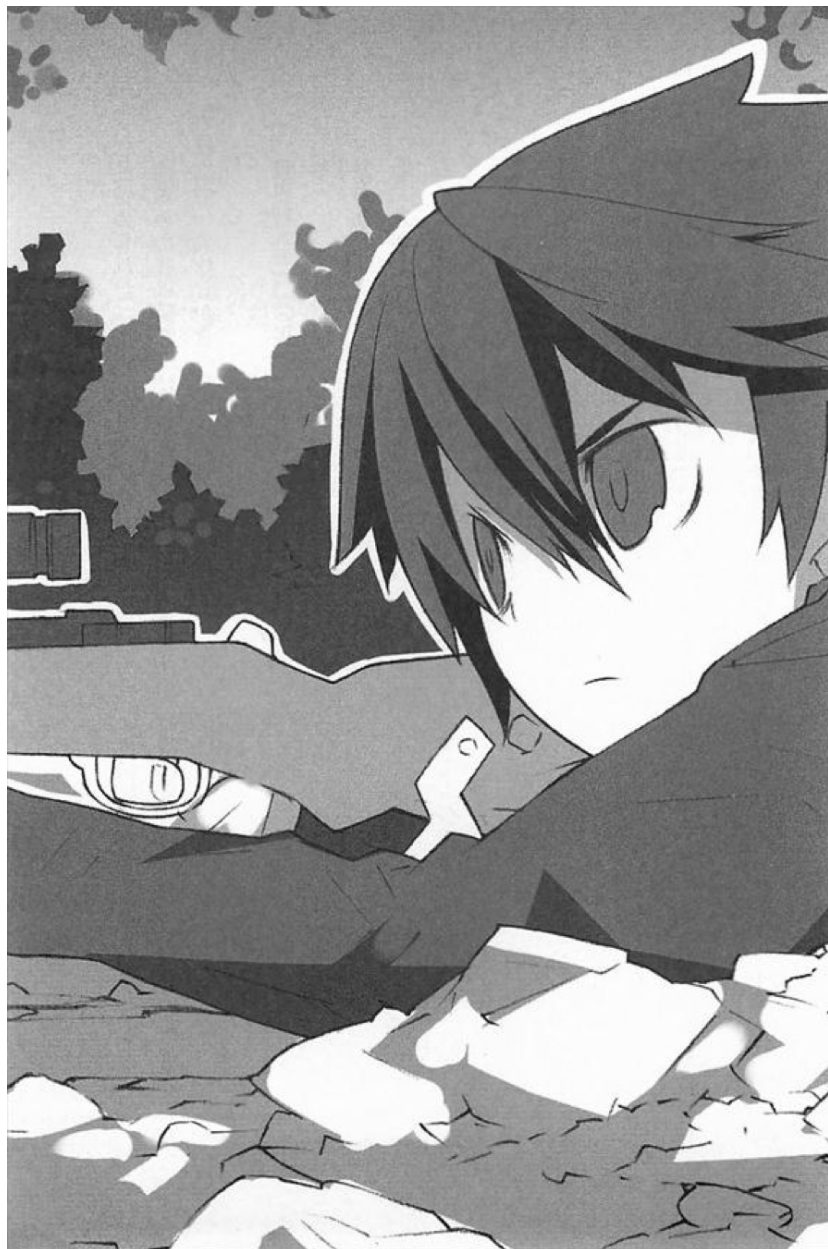
**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

I took Prince Treize hunting. He hunted large game for the first time.

All he had to do was hold his rifle atop a pile of sandbags and pull the trigger, but Prince Treize endured the long wait and succeeded triumphantly. I was the same age when I hunted my first big game. I was moved.

We made stew with the deer we caught. Prince Treize proudly handed out the venison to the villagers. He only had one piece left for himself at the end, but his smile never left his face.







**The year 3300 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

The prince and princess celebrated their eleventh birthday and the end of a century.  
I never imagined that I would live to this age, but these days I hope to live as long as I  
can.

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Miss Lillianne and Ms. Schultz came to visit.

They stayed for 10 full days this time, longer than ever before.

Prince Treize was overjoyed. He showed Miss Lillianne around everywhere in the valley. They went fishing and went out on walks together.

Miss Lillianne's energy and Prince Treize's composure was a wonderful match. Their laughter filled the village.

The women naively commented that it would be wonderful if the two of them were to marry.

I agreed with them, but stayed silent.

**The year 3301 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Several days ago, on Prince Treize's twelfth birthday, I gave him a gift—the rifle he had been too small to lift all those years ago.

Prince Treize thoughtfully considered the weight in his hands.

“Thank you, Grandfather. I'll use this responsibly,” he said.

When Prince Treize begins something new, he has the habit of practicing it constantly and persistently. There have been no end of gunshots from the village firing range since I gave him the rifle. It is almost entertaining to watch his shooting distance increase.

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize successfully flew an aeroplane alone today. He took off, flew, and landed without any assistance.

He is probably one of the youngest to do so in history. Sir Benedict was also thrilled, and became even more enthusiastic about the flying lessons.

Princess Meriel lost interest in flying completely and is now focused on tinkering with machinery.

**Autumn.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Unusually enough, Miss Lillianne and Ms. Schultz came to visit in the autumn.

Prince Treize took a welcome break from his training to relax with Miss Lillianne, going fishing and taking walks with her.

**The year 3302 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize turned 13 today.

This time, Princess Meriel had to be in Kunst for the celebration of the twelfth anniversary of the rebuilding of the palace. So the villagers got together to throw the prince a party.

Although he was the birthday boy, Prince Treize cooked alongside the women. He is skilled at brewing tea and cooking.

The women wanted to cut down the amount of time he spent hunting and shooting so they could teach him to cook. But I could not bring myself to agree.

**Summer.**

**A certain month, a certain day.**

The Schultz family did not join us this year, as Miss Lillianne is busy studying for exams. Prince Treize dedicated himself to training.

Whether it is marksmanship, flying, or his studies, he always pushes himself to the very limit.

When Princess Meriel had the chance to see him recently, she commented,  
“I’m not gonna lose to you.”

Princess Meriel is also dedicated to self-improvement. The prince and the princess are still in fierce competition, each claiming to be the older twin.



**The year 3303 of the World Calendar.**

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Miss Lillianne and Ms. Schultz came to visit.

Miss Lillianne proudly declared over lunch at the village hall that she knew how to fly an aeroplane. Prince Treize replied that he could as well.

Miss Lillianne didn't seem to believe him, so Prince Treize brought over an aeroplane and showed her.

He must have simply wanted to clear her misgivings, but it had the opposite effect. Miss Lillianne sulked when she saw that Prince Treize could do what she could, but better. I don't believe Prince Treize has noticed.

Addendum: The scene repeated itself later, when they discussed their fluency in Bezelese. Miss Lillianne continued to sulk.

**The year 3304 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

The villagers got together to celebrate Prince Treize and Princess Meriel's fifteenth birthday.

I joined the festivities as well. We had a rowdy, lively party.

Prince Treize received some important news from Fi and Sir Benedict afterwards when Princess Meriel was away, but no one knows what they discussed.

May the gods bless Fi, Sir Benedict, and the prince and princess.

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize joined a search party that went out to look for a child who disappeared from a nearby village. He personally led the way into the woods where a bear was rumored to be, and safely found the child in the torrential rain.

The prince received a hero's welcome at the village. He was asked to stay and attend school there, but he turned down the offer.

It might have been an attractive offer to him. But he said with a smile,

"If I'm at the other village, it'll be hard for me to rush straight over here when something happens."

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize has grown so much. Now he can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with any of the village men.

Today, we all went out to hunt and worked together to take down the beast. I have nothing left to teach him.

Sir Benedict gave the prince a present. A motorcycle with a sidecar.

Prince Treize was so ecstatic that he rode the motorcycle on the icy roads.

Princess Meriel is in charge of maintenance. They squabbled as they got their hands covered in grease. Fi captured them on camera with a smile on her face.

**The year 3305 of the World Calendar.**

**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize and Princess Meriel are 16 years old.

My health has worsened, and I am confined to my home on many occasions. Prince Treize often comes to visit.

He told me that he lost an argument to Princess Meriel today before he left the house. When he asked me how he could defeat her, I gave him an honest answer.

Prince Treize does not need to defeat Princess Meriel. I hope he will simply grow up to be a kind and considerate man.

**Summer.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize is heading to the Capital District on his motorcycle. He will be staying with the Schultz family there.

The women whispered excitedly amongst themselves, “Is he going to propose to her?” I am of the same mind—I want to see the two of them happy together.

Before that, however, Prince Treize must reveal his true heritage to her. But if he does, Miss Lillianne may end up distancing herself from him.

This situation calls for utmost delicacy. I do not believe the prince will have an easy time of it.

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize has begun preparations. He loaded the sidecar with camping gear, repair tools, extra parts, and an extra fuel tank. It will be a long, 20-day journey to the Capital District.

Fi fretted about the fact that he was leaving alone. Sir Benedict, on the other hand, looked a little envious.

Because the prince would not be accompanied by security, we received special permission from the Roxchean government to allow him to carry a firearm. The prince decided to take his favorite mid-sized handgun. He has been keeping up with his hand-to-hand combat training, so I do not think there is cause for worry.

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Prince Treize returned from his long trip.

The motorcycle was a mess from the journey, but Prince Treize looked healthier than ever.

But we were all shocked when, the moment he set foot in the village, he grabbed the first person he saw and asked for swimming lessons. Not many men in Ikstova swim. We managed to find a member of the royal guard who could, but Lake Ras was too cold for swimming. So the prince is now regularly visiting Elitèsa's heated pool.





**Winter.**

**A certain day, a certain month.**

Princess Meriel has been invited by the royal family of Bezel for a month-long visit over the new year.

Meanwhile, Prince Treize has invited the Schultz family to the royal family's cottage.

**A certain day, a certain month.**

There are only a few days left in the year.

Prince Treize plans to enjoy the new year with Miss Lillianne at the cottage near Kunst. The entire village hopes that things will work out for him this time.

We are making preparations now, but the prince took the chicken I was going to butcher for the dinner. He says he will use it as bait to lure out the wandering wolf. I wonder how it will go?

My health has improved, and I believe I will be able to attend the new year's celebrations at the villa. This year, Fi invited a film crew that has been shooting the landscapes of Ikstova.

After the party, I will ask Prince Treize how his plans worked out. I will take this journal to Kunst as well.

Will Prince Treize be smiling in the first entry of 3306?

It has already been 16 years since his birth.

It is truly an honor to have been able to spend all this time with him.

\* \* \*

**The year 3306 of the World Calendar. The second day of the new year, in the basement of the palace.**

Treize slowly slipped the yellowed journal into his bag and held a moment of silence for the owner of the note, who now slept in a casket.

He closed his eyes and quietly spoke.

“Grandfather...we took out all but one of the terrorists. The mastermind is still alive, but I’m going to leave her to mother. I’ve avenged you. ...Thank you for everything, Grandfather.”

Then, the Prince of Ikstova raised his arms to his face and wiped his tears as he did in his childhood.

★小生意気なガキ〜そして伝説へ〜★





9784840238007



1920193005103

ISBN978-4-8402-3800-7  
C0193 ¥510E



ASCII  
MEDIA  
WORKS

発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 **510 円**

※消費税が別に加算されます

